


Article

Seeing and Hearing God: Sensory Experience in Angela of Foligno's *Memoriale*

Eduard López Hortelano 

Department of Moral Theology and Praxis of Christian Life, Faculty of Theology, Pontifical Comillas University of Madrid, 28015 Madrid, Spain; elopezh@comillas.edu

Abstract

This article argues that Angela of Foligno's *Memoriale* constructs seeing and hearing as epistemic operations through which theological knowledge becomes possible. Rather than treating vision and audition as devotional motifs, the study reads them as structured modes of knowing that transform affect into cognition. Using selective close readings of key passages in the Latin tradition of the *Memoriale* alongside modern translations, the article shows how sensory language mediates authority, discernment, and transformation. The analysis proceeds in four steps: a methodological clarification concerning textual mediation; an examination of seeing as theological cognition; an analysis of hearing as interior authorization; and a discussion of affective pedagogy in which suffering and compassion become forms of knowledge. The article further argues that Angela's itinerary moves from Christological imitation toward Trinitarian participation, reframing the culmination of the journey as participation *in medio Trinitatis*. The *Memoriale* thus emerges as a theology of perception in which embodiment, affect, and cognition are inseparable.

Keywords: mysticism; vision and audition; sensory experience

1. Introduction

Recent scholarship on medieval mysticism has highlighted the importance of embodiment, affect, and sensory language in shaping religious experience. In the case of Angela of Foligno's *Memoriale*, the first and most substantial section of the *Liber of Angela of Foligno*, which records her spiritual experiences as mediated through her Franciscan confessor, vision, voice, and bodily perception have long been recognized as central features of the text. Yet while studies have extensively explored imagery, affectivity, and devotional practice, far less attention has been given to a related question: how sensory perception functions as a mode of theological knowing. This article addresses that gap by asking how the *Memoriale* constructs seeing and hearing not merely as devotional motifs, but as epistemic operations through which knowledge of God becomes possible.

Rather than approaching vision and audition as symbolic ornaments of mystical discourse, this study argues that they structure a sensory theology in which perception mediates cognition, authorizes theological speech, and shapes spiritual transformation. The *Memoriale* therefore emerges not simply as a narrative of mystical experience but as a text that theorizes how divine knowledge is acquired, verified, and communicated through the senses. Seeing and hearing are presented as coordinated modes of discernment in which affect, interpretation, and authority converge.

Methodologically, this study does not claim access to Angela's unmediated first-person experience. The *Memoriale* is a mediated text, dictated, recorded in Latin, and



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transmitted through processes of redaction and compilation. The analysis therefore focuses on how the narrative constructs sensory perception as theological discourse rather than on reconstructing interior experience directly. In this sense, the article examines the textual performance of perception: how the narrative itself organizes seeing and hearing as reliable paths toward theological understanding.

Within the broader landscape of thirteenth-century religious culture, the *Memoriale* occupies a distinctive position at the intersection of vernacular spirituality and ecclesial mediation. Female religious voices increasingly articulated forms of theology grounded in practice, affect, and embodied devotion, while remaining deeply shaped by Latin theological frameworks. Angela's text stands within this context, yet its originality lies in the way it transforms sensory language into an instrument of reflection and instruction. Vision and voice are not only narrated; they are pedagogically structured so that readers learn how to perceive and interpret the divine.

This article therefore concentrates on the interplay between seeing and hearing as the primary axes of Angela's theological perception. Other important themes—such as broader comparative mysticism, general ascetical models, or exhaustive historical contextualization—are acknowledged but intentionally set aside in order to preserve analytical focus. The argument unfolds in four stages: first, a brief methodological clarification concerning textual mediation; second, an analysis of vision as theological cognition; third, an examination of hearing and interior voice as epistemic authority; and finally, a discussion of how affect, suffering, and sensory transformation function as a pedagogy of knowing that culminates in relational participation in divine life.

By foregrounding perception as a mode of knowing, the article proposes a new way of reading Angela of Foligno's *Memoriale*: not only as a testimony of mystical experience, but as a sustained reflection on how the body becomes a site where theology is learned, interpreted, and transmitted.

2. Current State of Research

In recent years, scholars have increasingly focused on embodiment, affect, and sensory expression as key features of medieval mysticism. Anglophone studies have explored the role of vision, voice, and perception in shaping Angela's religious discourse, often interpreting sensory language as central to her articulation of divine encounter (Maggi 2012; Heffernan 2019). At the same time, Italian and Spanish-language scholarship has deepened the theological and anthropological analysis of Angela's body, suffering, and affective expression, highlighting the material and experiential dimensions of her spirituality (Cervigni 2005; Fusco 2009; Yébenes Escardó 2019).

Despite these advances, an important gap remains. While vision, hearing, and bodily experience are frequently discussed as devotional or symbolic elements, far less attention has been given to their epistemological function (Espinosa Arce 2021). The senses are typically treated as vehicles of religious expression rather than as structured modes through which theological knowledge is generated, validated, and communicated within the narrative itself (McGinn 1998, p. 201).

Methodological differences within the field have contributed to this situation. Phenomenological approaches have tended to foreground experience, whereas historical-textual studies have emphasized mediation, redaction, and manuscript transmission. Yet the question of how a mediated text constructs perception as theological cognition remains insufficiently explored. The tension between experience and textual mediation therefore calls for a more precise analytical framework capable of examining how sensory language operates not only descriptively but epistemologically.

This article builds upon existing scholarship while shifting the focus toward sensory epistemology. Instead of asking merely how Angela experiences seeing and hearing, it asks how the *Memoriale* organizes these senses as cognitive operations that shape discernment, authority, and theological understanding. In doing so, the study aims to reposition Angela's text within wider debates on cognition, affect, and theological pedagogy, proposing that sensory perception functions as a structured mode of knowing rather than simply as an expression of mystical experience.

3. Methodological Note: Textual Mediation and Sensory Epistemology

Narrative Mediation and Epistemic Authority

The *Memorial* is a mediated text. Angela's words were dictated, recorded in Latin,¹ and transmitted through processes of redaction and compilation.² Consequently, this study does not attempt to reconstruct Angela's unmediated interior experience. Instead, it examines how the narrative constructs perception as theological discourse within a textual and editorial framework.

Methodologically, the article approaches seeing and hearing not simply as experiential motifs but as epistemic operations. Rather than asking what Angela experienced, the analysis investigates how the text organizes sensory perception as a mode of cognition that produces authority, discernment, and theological meaning. This approach allows sensory language to be read as structured knowledge rather than as purely symbolic or emotional expression.

Finally, the study adopts an interpretive framework in which affect and perception are understood as pedagogical dimensions of theological knowing. The analysis that follows therefore focuses on how visual and auditory episodes function as moments where feeling, interpretation, and cognition converge, preparing the ground for the broader discussion of sensory pedagogy developed later in the article.

The *Memoriale*³ should not be understood as a fixed piece of literary architecture but as a mediated narrative in which experience is progressively interpreted, verified, and transmitted. Rather than emphasizing formal symmetry or symbolic structures, this study approaches the text as a collaborative construction shaped by Angela's testimony and the interpretive intervention of Friar A. The narrative therefore functions less as a static composition than as a process through which sensory experience becomes communicable theological discourse.

This mediation is crucial for understanding the epistemological dynamics of the text. Visionary and affective episodes do not appear as self-evident revelations; they are repeatedly reframed, interpreted, and authenticated within the narrative. The alternation between Angela's experiential language and Friar A's validating voice establishes a structure of discernment in which perception acquires authority through narration. In this sense, the *Memoriale* stages a movement from perception to interpretation, transforming sensory events into shared theological knowledge.

The pedagogical intention of the text emerges precisely from this process. Angela's experience is presented not simply as autobiographical testimony but as a model capable of instructing readers in how to perceive and interpret divine action. The narrative thus mediates between private experience and communal teaching, showing that mystical perception requires rhetorical framing in order to become intelligible and transmissible. Seen from this perspective, the literary form of the *Memoriale* does not constitute an autonomous object of analysis but provides the epistemic conditions that make the sensory theology of the text possible. The following sections therefore turn to the analysis of vision and hearing as the primary modes through which this mediated knowledge is enacted.

4. Seeing as Theological Cognition

4.1. Vision and Audition in the *Vetrata Degli Angeli*

Vision here does not function primarily as visual representation but as a mode of theological cognition. Rather than narrating visionary episodes as extraordinary events, the text presents seeing as an interpretive act through which knowledge of God becomes possible. The progression described in the so-called ‘steps’ should therefore be read less as a symbolic ascent than as a process in which perception is progressively reoriented, transforming experience into theological understanding.⁴ Within this framework, the language of humility and poverty does not merely describe moral disposition but marks a cognitive transformation. The movement toward *kenosis* reconfigures perception itself: the soul learns to see differently. Vision thus becomes inseparable from discernment, and sensory encounter becomes the site where knowledge is produced. The narrative repeatedly emphasizes that revelation is not immediate but mediated through interpretation, memory, and textual framing.

A decisive example of this dynamic appears in Angela’s encounter before the image of Christ in the Basilica of Assisi, traditionally associated with the *Vetrata degli angeli* (Figure 1). The episode is not presented simply as a visual experience but as a moment in which seeing generates interior understanding and reorients the subject toward divine knowledge. What matters in the narrative is not the image as object but the cognitive transformation it produces: perception becomes interpretation, and interpretation becomes theological insight.



Figure 1. © Archivio fotografico del Sacro Convento di S. Francesco in Assisi, Italia.

This process is reinforced by the interplay between vision, hearing, and narrative mediation. The text stages multiple voices—divine address, Angela’s testimony, and Friar A’s framing—which together authorize the experience as communicable knowledge. Vision, in this sense, does not stand alone but operates within a network of interpretation that allows sensory perception to acquire epistemic authority. The following analysis therefore examines how this visionary moment functions as a paradigmatic instance in which seeing becomes knowing, preparing the ground for the subsequent exploration of hearing as a complementary mode of theological cognition. The case of Angela of Foligno corresponds more closely to the ‘passional tradition’ (Cirlot and Garí 2008, p. 192). From this perspective, the ‘steps’ function as didactic stages oriented toward union with God, reconfiguring perception as a mode of theological knowing.

However, they are not articulated as ‘ascents’ toward the divine but rather as ‘descents’ into poverty and humility. It is there, in *kenosis*, that the union—understood in spousal terms—between the soul and God is revealed. This union leads her, as recounted in the twentieth step, to sell all her possessions and give them to the poor, after the fulfillment of the “aforementioned promise” in the nineteenth step: “Neither gold nor silver do I desire; even if you were to give me the whole world, I desire only you.” To this came the reply: “Pay attention, for precisely when you cease what you are doing, the entire Trinity will come to you” (Angela de Foligno 2014, chap. I, pp. 46–47).⁵

An event marks the life of Angela of Foligno: a cry uttered before the image of Christ—attributed to Cimabue—embracing Saint Francis in Assisi (Figure 1), located in the *Vetrata degli angeli*, where Christ presenting and supporting the *Poverello* of Assisi (part A) and the *Theotokos*, Mary, presenting the Christ Child (part B), are arranged in a parallel and symmetrical manner.

In Angela of Foligno, imagination and its visual components activate her entire understanding and will. Her visionary imagination acquires distinctive features, particularly the correlation between hearing and sight. It is not known which comes first: whether what is heard inwardly gives rise to imaginative mental activity, or whether the process unfolds in the opposite direction. The experience of faith through these two senses—hearing and seeing—establishes indissoluble bonds that are translated from Angela’s experiential plane to the textual plane through a third voice: that of Friar A. Consequently, the *Memoriale* interweaves three voices: that of God, that of Angela, and that of Friar A. First, let us examine that visionary moment: the vision of Angela of Foligno in the Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi, “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” (García Acosta 2013, p. 130).⁶

From the outset, Saint Francis appears in an intercessory role within a framework of petition—namely, that of true poverty—and pilgrimage, motifs that, while broadly Christian, acquire a distinctive articulation within the Franciscan tradition. Furthermore, the response of the Holy Spirit introduces an affective dimension through which the spousal metaphor emerges as a third theme that resonates strongly with Franciscan spirituality. The ascent to Assisi thus possesses not only a narrative function but also a profoundly metaphorical one, thereby inscribing itself within the long spiritual tradition of the *homo viator*. In the case of Angela of Foligno, this tradition is articulated through the journey toward the Basilica and the upward movement toward the mountain on which it stands, thereby delineating an interior, spiritual space “based on a very widespread tradition: the image on the *viator* walking along a path that ultimately leads to God. 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 contacting the divine. In Christianity, we find innumerable uses of this image in a long-established tradition” (García Acosta 2013,

pp. 125–26). Certainly, this spiritual space marks the encounter with the Divine, a “luogo angelico” (angelical space), as Sensi describes it in his research.

That love and sweetness overflow the very love possessed by the ‘faithful of Christ,’ narrated in the passive voice as “my beloved by me.” We thus witness a process of individuation, namely that of personal experience. In this ascent—“something that her contemporaries knew very well: a soul which prepares itself for a quest for God” (Morrison 2003, p. 127)—doubts emerge in Angela of Foligno.⁷

The episode intensifies the dynamic already observed between vision and audition. Angela initially questions the interior voice, fearing deception and vainglory, yet the narrative shows how perception itself becomes the means of discernment. Hearing introduces doubt, while sight confirms meaning: what is seen in creation and in the devotional image acquires theological significance through the interpretive framework established by the voice. The result is not a simple alternation between senses, but a coordinated process in which hearing and seeing mutually validate one another.

This movement becomes explicit in the repeated references to the Passion, where the divine voice reinterprets perception through relational language (‘for you’), “and in order to give me certainty amid my doubts, he said: ‘I am the one who was crucified for you, who hungered and thirsted for you, and who shed my blood for you: so greatly did I love you.’ And thus, he recounted to her the whole of the Passion” (Angela de Foligno 2014, chap. III, p. 55).⁸ Here the sensory experience is transformed into knowledge: seeing does not remain a visual act but becomes intelligible only through what is heard. The narrative therefore presents cognition as dialogical, generated through the interplay between sensory reception and interior interpretation.

The second moment before the image of Christ embracing Francis further clarifies this epistemic structure. Angela describes herself as seeing “with the eyes of the body and with those of the mind,”⁹ a formula that echoes the medieval distinction between bodily and interior perception. The progression from external sight toward interior understanding does not reject corporeal vision but elevates it, transforming it into a threshold of contemplative cognition. Vision thus becomes the site where sensory and intellectual perception converge. This dynamic can be illuminated by the traditional distinction between *oculi carnis* and *oculi mentis*,¹⁰ in which sensible perception initiates a process leading toward spiritual insight. The *Memoriale* does not present vision as immediate access to the divine but as an interpretive movement guided by hearing. The interior word directs the gaze, allowing what is seen to acquire theological intelligibility. Seeing and hearing therefore function together as epistemic operations rather than as isolated experiences.

What emerges most clearly in the narrative is the progressive excess of perception. The image first mediates devotion, then generates identification, and finally gives way to an experience that exceeds representation, culminating in Angela’s attempt to articulate the inexpressible as *Omne bonum*. At this point, the limits of vision produce a new movement toward voice: the cry that follows the departure of the divine presence marks the passage from seeing to speaking, revealing that knowledge formed through perception seeks expression in language:

“And this second time, precisely when I knelt at the entrance of the church and saw Saint Francis painted upon the breast of Christ, he said to me: ‘Thus closely shall I hold you embraced, and far more than you can comprehend with bodily eyes. But now it is time that I fulfill what I promised to you, sweet daughter, my temple, my love: that, just as with this consolation, I must abandon you, yet I will never leave you if you love me.’ And then, although these words were bitter, I felt such sweetness that it was intensely most sweet. And then I looked as though with the eyes of the body and with those of the mind. And when I, brother, asked her and said to her, ‘What did you see?’, she

replied, saying: ‘I saw something full, an immense majesty that I cannot express, but I saw that it was the *Omne bonum*.’ And many words of sweetness he spoke to me as he departed, and with immense gentleness he withdrew slowly, pausing again and again” (Angela de Foligno 2014, chap. III, p. 56).¹¹

The episode therefore demonstrates the central epistemological claim of this article: sensory experience in the *Memoriale* is never merely descriptive but interpretive. Vision leads to understanding, hearing stabilizes interpretation, and narration transforms the event into communicable theological knowledge. All these interdependencies shape what we term visual culture, “which talks about a complex interrelated system of phenomena” (García Acosta 2013, p. 120). In fact, the key lies in the excess of love for Christ, which transforms simple physical perception into an iconic mode of seeing, transcending figuration and generating meanings that demand interpretation, “and then, after he had departed from me, I began to cry out loudly, indeed to shout. And without any shame I cried and exclaimed, saying these words: ‘Unknown love, why do you leave me?’ Yet I could say nothing other than these words, which I cried out without shame: ‘Unknown love—and why, and why, and why’” (Angela de Foligno 2014, chap. III, p. 58).¹² At this moment of transcendence, the voices of Friar A and Angela of Foligno intersect when he asks her what it is that she has seen.

4.2. *Imago Passionis and the Pedagogy of Vision*

The contemplation of Christ’s Passion functions not merely as an object of devotion but as a cognitive path through which the soul learns to perceive and understand divine reality. As Diane Tomkinson has observed, Angela frequently “chose details consistent with her own life experience to teach about Christ’s poverty, suffering and contempt,” (Tomkinson 2012, pp. 117–18) indicating that the Passion operates not only as a narrative focus but as a pedagogical and interpretive framework through which perception becomes theological knowledge.

The progression described in the so-called ‘steps’ should therefore be read less as a linear spiritual ascent and more as a pedagogical reorientation of perception. Poverty, suffering, and humility do not operate simply as moral virtues; they transform how the subject sees, hears, and interprets the divine, “consists in an imitation of Christ leading to *conformitas Christi*, that is, conformity with Christ. Poverty, suffering, and humility are the agents of the soul’s transformation. Yet everything begins with the contemplation of the cross” (Cirlot and Garí 2008, p. 192). Properly speaking, the union with God in Angela of Foligno should be understood as a kenotic elevation, a dynamic that Tomkinson has described as a spiral, in which the ascent toward God unfolds through successive movements of self-emptying (Tomkinson 2004, p. 211). The contemplative encounter with the cross is narrated in Chapter I: “In the seventh step, I was allowed to see the cross, on which I saw Christ dead for us. Yet this was a tasteless vision, although I felt great sorrow” (Angela de Foligno 2014, chap. I, p. 40).¹³

The early stages of the itinerary establish this transformation through self-knowledge and the recognition of sin, yet the decisive shift occurs when the gaze becomes fixed upon the crucified Christ. The *imago crucis* functions simultaneously as visual focus and interpretive framework: seeing the Passion produces a change in understanding. The image is not passive; it calls forth response, decision, and imitation. In this sense, the Passion operates epistemologically, structuring the movement from perception to action. As García Acosta observes with regard to the ambiguity of the concept of *imago*, this figure functions “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 a symbol of the presence of God within)” (García Acosta 2013, p. 122).

Christology is presented fundamentally through two converging images that complement and mutually inform one another: Jesus Christ, obedient to the will of the Father in his redemptive mission (a descending Christology), and Jesus Christ, the one who journeys toward 'Jerusalem,' toward the Passion and Glory, inaugurating a salvific mission (an ascending Christology).

Angela's testimony repeatedly shows that vision alone is insufficient. The image of the cross becomes intelligible through dialogue, interior hearing, and interpretation. What is seen is clarified by what is heard, and the two senses cooperate to generate theological meaning. The experience therefore unfolds as a process in which sensory perception is progressively deepened: corporeal sight becomes interior understanding, and affective response becomes knowledge, "a pedagogy of the senses, in which affect and perception replace argument as instruments of theological cognition" (Hollywood 2002, p. 149).

This dynamic is intensified in the supplementary revelations, where contemplation of the Crucified leads to participatory perception. Angela describes moments in which the body's senses give way to an interior embrace, suggesting that vision moves from observation toward incorporation, "but in this understanding of the cross I received such fire that, being close to it, I stripped myself of all my garments and offered myself wholly to Christ" (Angela de Foligno 2014, chap. I, p. 40).¹⁴

The narrative no longer presents the Passion as external spectacle but as relational participation, in which the soul enters symbolically into Christ's suffering and discovers a new mode of knowing grounded in affective union. As Cirlot and Garí have noted, "the eye fixes itself on the point indicated by Christ's gesture" (Cirlot and Garí 2008, p. 193). Particularly significant is the recurring focus on Christ's wounds: "And the way of the cross was taught to me, clarified, and shown in this manner: that if I wished to go to the cross, I should strip myself so as to be lighter and walk naked toward the cross—that is, that I should forgive all those who had offended me, and divest myself of all earthly things and of all men and women, and of all friends and relatives, and of all others, and of my possessions, and of myself" (Angela de Foligno 2014, chap. I, p. 41).¹⁵ The gaze narrows, concentrating attention on specific details that become sites of interpretation and dialogue. Seeing and hearing converge as the voice of Christ interprets the meaning of what is seen, transforming visual contemplation into theological insight, but rather as "a theological deepening of the experience carried out by Friar A himself" (Vedova 2010, p. 598): "And he [the Crucified] told me to behold his wounds, and in a miraculous manner showed me how he had endured everything for me" (Angela de Foligno 2014, chap. I, p. 41).¹⁶

The Passion thus functions as a sensory pedagogy or "the senses as a vehicle in that unification with Christ" (Morrison 2003, p. 204): perception is educated through repetition, affect, and narrative framing. At this point, vision becomes explicitly transformative rather than merely descriptive. Angela's testimony suggests a reciprocity of perception in which seeing Christ implies being seen by Christ. The gaze is no longer unilateral but relational, producing what may be described as a deifying dynamic: the subject is reshaped through participation in the one contemplated. The *imago passionis* therefore reveals how sensory experience operates as a mode of theological cognition in which affect, perception, and understanding become inseparable.

The movement from the cross toward union consequently does not end in mere emotional intensity but in a reconfiguration of knowledge itself. The Passion teaches the soul how to perceive, interpret, and inhabit divine reality: "Once, during Vespers, as I was gazing upon the cross and looking at the crucifix with my bodily eyes, suddenly and unexpectedly a love was kindled within my soul, and all the members of my body felt it with supreme joy. And I saw and felt that, within me, Christ was embracing my soul with

his arm—the arm that had been crucified [. . .] And I rejoiced in him with great joy and assurance” (Angela de Foligno 2014, chap. VI, p. 88).¹⁷

Seen in this way, the *imago passionis* stands at the center of Angela’s sensory theology, preparing the transition from Christological imitation toward the Trinitarian horizon. While humility and poverty structure Angela’s Christological imitation, the trajectory does not culminate solely in kenosis. As recent scholarship has emphasized, the endpoint of Angela’s itinerary is better understood as participation in the life of the Trinity. The movement toward poverty functions as preparation for a deeper incorporation into the life of the Trinity, where seeing and hearing no longer serve merely as ascetical exercises but as modes of deifying communion (Hahn 2026). This shift from Christological conformity to Trinitarian participation clarifies the theological horizon of Angela’s sensory experience.

5. Hearing and Interior Voice as Theological Cognition

If vision initiates perception, hearing provides the interpretive structure that renders perception intelligible. The interior voice does not merely accompany Angela’s visionary experiences; rather, it functions as a cognitive framework through which sensory events acquire theological meaning. Indeed, the narrative repeatedly suggests that what is seen becomes understandable only when interpreted through words addressed to the subject. In this sense, audition is not secondary to vision but epistemologically complementary, since the voice clarifies, stabilizes, and directs perception. Consequently, hearing transforms sensory encounter into structured understanding, marking the transition from experience to interpretation. Through this interplay, the text constructs a model of cognition in which perception is inseparable from hermeneutics, and knowledge emerges through the coordinated activity of the senses.¹⁸

Moreover, the epistemic role of hearing becomes especially evident in moments of hesitation and doubt, when Angela questions the origin and reliability of the words she hears inwardly. These episodes reveal that interior audition functions as a process of discernment rather than passive reception. The voice is tested, examined, and even resisted, demonstrating that theological knowledge arises through interpretive struggle rather than immediate certainty. In this way, discernment becomes an interior practice through which the subject learns to distinguish divine speech from illusion or self-deception. As a result, hearing acquires a pedagogical function: it educates perception and refines judgment. The narrative thus presents listening as an active cognitive discipline through which theological meaning is progressively stabilized and verified.

Furthermore, the authority of the interior voice is reinforced by the narrative mediation that structures the *Memoriale*, particularly through the role of Friar A. The text repeatedly stages processes of retelling, clarification, and verification that transform private audition into communicable theological discourse. Consequently, authority does not arise solely from the immediacy of mystical experience but from its inscription within a textual framework that validates and interprets it. This collaborative dimension demonstrates that hearing is not an isolated interior event but a process shaped by communal discernment and narrative authorization. Thus, what is heard becomes theologically authoritative precisely because it is interpreted, transmitted, and stabilized through narration.

In addition, the epistemological function of hearing is closely tied to the performative character of divine speech. The repeated use of relational expressions—particularly the formula “for you”—suggests that speech acts in the *Memoriale* do not merely communicate information but generate knowledge through address. These utterances reposition the subject within a relational horizon, transforming vision into participatory understanding. Accordingly, theological meaning emerges not through abstraction but through dialogical engagement, in which the spoken word interprets the significance of what has been per-

ceived. The Passion narratives exemplify this dynamic, as the repeated “for you” converts contemplation into personal participation. Speech, therefore, functions performatively, producing knowledge by binding perception to relational meaning.

Likewise, the interior voice not only interprets experience but also enables theological expression. Angela’s attempts to articulate what she has seen repeatedly arise from what she has heard, indicating that audition precedes and grounds speech. The movement from hearing to speaking reveals an additional cognitive stage in which knowledge becomes communicable language. Through this process, the ineffable is gradually translated into discourse, allowing mystical experience to enter the realm of shared theology. Hearing thus operates as a preparatory condition for theological speech, transforming interior perception into communicable testimony. Consequently, the narrative presents language itself as the outcome of auditory cognition, linking experience, interpretation, and transmission.

Finally, hearing completes the sensory epistemology established through vision. Whereas seeing initiates encounter and opens the subject to transformation, hearing stabilizes meaning, authorizes interpretation, and converts perception into theological knowledge. The interior voice ensures that sensory experience does not remain ambiguous but becomes intelligible within a theological horizon. Through discernment, verification, and performative address, audition brings perception to completion as knowledge. The interplay between hearing and seeing therefore constitutes the central epistemic dynamic of the *Memoriale*, revealing a model of embodied cognition in which understanding emerges through the disciplined cooperation of the senses. Hearing, in this sense, does not merely accompany vision but fulfills its cognitive potential, enabling sensory experience to become theology.

6. Discussion: Sensory Epistemology and Affective Pedagogy

The analyses developed in this study suggest that Angela of Foligno’s *Memoriale* can be understood as a sensory epistemology in which perception functions as a structured mode of theological knowing. Seeing and hearing do not merely accompany mystical experience; they organize it. Vision initiates perception, hearing interprets and stabilizes meaning, and narration transforms individual experience into communicable theological discourse. In this sense, the body does not appear as a passive recipient of revelation but as an active locus of cognition.

This reading resonates with broader discussions of embodiment in medieval theology. Caroline Walker Bynum has emphasized the cognitive significance of the body in women’s religious practice, arguing that bodily experience often becomes a privileged site of theological meaning: “the body is not merely the prison of the soul but its pedagogue, its text, its metaphor. Through hunger, touch, and vision, women such as Angela of Foligno learned divine truths that scholastic men sought through abstraction” (Walker Bynum 1991b, p. 258). The *Memoriale*, however, goes one step further by showing how sensory perception itself becomes pedagogical: the senses are progressively educated, moving from external perception toward interior understanding. Knowledge emerges not despite affect but through it.

The relationship between perception and discourse is equally significant. As Bernard McGinn has noted, late medieval mystical texts frequently translate ineffable experience into forms capable of instruction (McGinn 1998, p. 202). Angela’s narrative performs precisely this movement. The mediation of Friar A transforms perception into theology, stabilizing the meaning of sensory experiences and rendering them transmissible. The text thus teaches readers not simply what Angela experienced, but how perception itself can become interpretive and theological (McGinn 1998, p. 205).

Within this framework, suffering and affect acquire epistemic value. The Passion does not function solely as an emotional or devotional focus; it becomes a pedagogical space in which feeling generates understanding. In this respect, Angela's itinerary aligns with interpretations such as those developed by Amy Hollywood, who highlights the pedagogical dynamics of mystical discourse, "a sensory pedagogy that both enacts and transgresses the limits of theological discourse" (Hollywood 2002, p. 146). Yet in the *Memoriale*, affective intensity is consistently integrated with cognitive transformation: to feel is simultaneously to learn and to discern (Newman 2003, p. 238).

The dialogical structure of the narrative further reinforces this pedagogical dimension. Angela's voice, the divine address, and the mediating role of Friar A together establish a collaborative framework in which private perception becomes communal knowledge (Voaden 1999, p. 87). Mystical experience is therefore neither isolated nor purely interior; it is shaped by processes of verification, narration, and interpretation that authorize it within a theological community.

From a broader theological perspective, the sensory pedagogy of the *Memoriale* reveals an embodied model of illumination. Knowing God emerges through perception, affect, "a lived exegesis of divine love" (Newman 1995, p. 121), and relational participation rather than through abstraction alone. The repeated movement from seeing to hearing and from perception to speech demonstrates that cognition in Angela's text is fundamentally relational: knowledge arises through encounter and transformation.

Ultimately, reading the *Memoriale* through the lens of sensory epistemology allows us to reinterpret Angela not only as a witness of mystical experience but as a thinker who articulates how theological knowledge is formed through the senses (Walker Bynum 1991a, p. 89). Her text offers a model in which embodiment, affect, and cognition converge, suggesting that medieval mystical theology can be understood as a disciplined practice of learning to perceive the divine.

7. Conclusions

This study has argued that Angela of Foligno's *Memoriale* constructs a sensory theology in which seeing and hearing function as epistemic operations rather than merely devotional motifs. Throughout the text, perception is progressively transformed into understanding: vision initiates encounter, hearing interprets and stabilizes meaning, and narration renders experience communicable within a theological community. The result is not simply the description of mystical experience but the articulation of a mode of knowing grounded in embodied perception.

The analysis of Angela's visionary episodes demonstrates that the figurative and the affective do not remain at the level of imagery or emotion. Instead, they operate as pedagogical mechanisms through which cognition is formed. The contemplation of the Passion, the interplay of voices, and the mediation of Friar A together reveal that sensory experience in the *Memoriale* is structured, interpretive, and didactic. Knowledge emerges through the coordination of sight and hearing, showing that theological understanding is learned through perception rather than opposed to it.

At the same time, the collaborative and dialogical nature of the text highlights how private experience becomes communal teaching. Angela's voice, intertwined with divine speech and narrative mediation, transforms personal perception into shared theology. In this sense, the *Memoriale* functions not only as testimony but as instruction, guiding readers through a process of sensory discernment that reshapes how divine presence is perceived.

Finally, the trajectory traced in the text suggests that sensory pedagogy leads beyond Christological imitation toward relational participation in divine life. Seeing and hearing evolve from ascetical practices into modes of communion, indicating a theological horizon

in which perception itself becomes transformative. Angela's mysticism therefore emerges not simply as affective spirituality but as a disciplined epistemology of the senses.

By foregrounding perception as a mode of knowing, this article proposes a new reading of Angela of Foligno as a thinker of sensory mediation whose work contributes to broader discussions on embodiment, cognition, and theological method. The *Memoriale* thus appears not only as a record of mystical experience but as a medieval model of how theology can be learned through the body, interpreted through language, and transmitted through narrative.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

Chap. Chapter

Notes

- ¹ This study consults the Latin critical editions of the *Memoriale*, particularly the edition of Enrico Menestò ([Angela de Foligno 2013](#)), alongside the earlier critical edition by [Angela de Foligno \(1985\)](#), while employing modern translations for readability in the main text.
- ² We are informed that they are thirty steps; yet, in the final version, they become twenty steps (chap. I), together with seven supplementary ones (chaps. III–IX), interrupted by Friar A's interlude (chap. II). The resulting total is therefore twenty-seven. In this regard—and without entering into the matter in greater depth, since it does not fall within the scope of our study—following the research of [Pozzi \(1992, pp. 84–85\)](#), argues that the discrepancy between thirty and twenty-seven derives from two distinct redactional stages. For the redactional complexity of the work, the diversity of manuscript witnesses, and the various scholarly hypotheses, see: ([Poirel 2002](#)).
- ³ We will follow the edition: ([Angela de Foligno 2014](#)). It will be cited as *Memoriale*, followed by the chapter and page number of that edition.
- ⁴ The structure of the work unfolds gradually, mirroring the interior experience it seeks to narrate, and drawing upon a broad patristic and medieval tradition in which “the symbol of the ladder served perfectly to express the soul's ascent to God,” ([Cirlot and Garí 2008, p. 187](#)) echoing John Climacus's *Scala paradisi* (c. 575–c. 649). This ascent, however, must be understood as an ascent through descent, or as *kenosis* expressed through humility and poverty.
- ⁵ “Nolo aurum nec argentum, etiam si dares michi totum mundum, nolo aliud nisi te.” Et tunc respondit ita: ‘Studeas te, quia statim, quando hoc quod facis factum fuerit, tota Trinitas veniet in te’” ([Angela de Foligno 2013, p. 13](#)). “Ni quiero ni oro ni plata: aunque me dieses el mundo entero, solo te quiero a ti. Y entonces le fue respondido: ‘Atenta, porque justo cuando dejes lo que estás haciendo, la Trinidad entera vendrá a ti’”.
- ⁶ For this reason, and in keeping with the Franciscan tradition, we may speak of a second baptism in the case of Angela, within this symbolic, sacred, and seraphic space. The episode is: “And among other things, she implored Saint Francis to implore God on her behalf so that she might be able to feel Christ, and that Saint Francis might obtain from God for her this grace, since she was faithfully observing the Franciscan Rule, which she had professed only recently, and above all that he might make her live and die in true poverty. That is to say, she obtained from Christ that He should make her truly poor [. . .] And she told me many other things that she asked for in the prayer she made along the way. And when she reached Spello and the narrow road that crosses the town and ascends toward Assisi, there, at the crossroads, the following was said to her: ‘You have been praying to my servant Francis, and I have not wished to send you another messenger. I am the Holy Spirit, who has come to you to give you a consolation such as you have never experienced before. And I shall be within you until Saint Francis, and no one will notice. And I wish to speak with you continuously along this road, and you will be unable to do anything else, for I have bound you to myself’ [. . .] And He began to say: ‘My daughter, sweet to me, my delight, my temple: love me, for you are my beloved

for me, far more than you love me” (Angela de Foligno 2014, chap. III, pp. 54–55). “Et inter alia rogaverat beatum Franciscum quod ipse rogaret Deum pro ea ut ipsa sentiret de Christo, et quod gratiam acquireret beatus Franciscus a Deo, qua ipsa servaret bene regulam beati Francisci quam noviter promiserat, et maxime pro hoc scilicet quod faceret eam esse et finire vere pauperem. [...] Unde et quando tunc ibat ad Sanctum Franciscum rogabat etum, scilicet beatum Franciscum, quod predictam gratiam ei acquireret a Domino Iesu Christo; et multa alia referebat quod postulabat in illa oratione quam faciebat illa viam. Et quando ipsa pervenit inter Spellum et viam artam que est ultra Sepellum 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 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 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 amas me’ (Angela de Foligno 2013, pp. 22–23). “Y entre otras cosas, le rogaba a san Francisco que le rogara a Dios por ella para que pudiera sentir a Cristo, y que san Francisco obtuviera de Dios para sí la gracia, ya que ella servía bien la regla franciscana, la cual profesaba desde hacía poco y, sobre todo, que le hiciera vivir y morir en pobreza verdadera. Es decir, obtuvo de Cristo que la hiciera verdaderamente pobre [...] Y me contaba muchas otras cosas que pedía en la oración que hacía en el camino. Y cuando llegó a Spelo y a la vía estrecha que atraviesa el pueblo y asciende a Asís allí, en el trivio, le fue dicho lo siguiente: ‘Has estado rogando a mi siervo Francisco y yo no he querido enviarte otro mensajero. Yo soy el Espíritu Santo que ha venido a ti para darte un consuelo que nunca antes habías probado. Y estaré dentro de ti hasta San Francisco y nadie se dará cuenta. Y quiero ir hablando contigo por este camino sin parar, y tú no podrás hacer ninguna otra cosa, ya que te he atado a mí’ [...] Y empezó a decir: ‘Hija mía, dulce para mí, mi deleite, mi templo: ámame, porque tú eres mi amada por mí, mucho más de lo que tú me amas a mí.’”

7 “With these words she began to doubt greatly, and her soul said: ‘If you were the Holy Spirit, you would not say this to me, for it does not befit me, since I am fragile and therefore could fall into vainglory.’ And he replied: ‘Now consider whether, because of all this, you can fall into a vainglory that puffs you up; and flee from these words, if you can.’ And I compelled myself to feel vainglory, in order to test whether what had been said to me was true and whether those words came from the Holy Spirit. And I began to look at the vineyards, so as to forget those words—that is, that discourse—and wherever I wished to look, I said to myself: ‘This is my creature.’ And I felt an ineffable divine sweetness” (Angela de Foligno 2014, chap. III, p. 55). “In istis verbis cepi dubitare multum et dixi anima sibi: ‘Si tu esses Spiritus Sanctus non diceres istud michi, quia non convenit et ego sum fragilis que possem inde habere vanam gloriam.’ Et respondit: ‘Modo cogita si tu de omnibus istis potes habere unam vanam gloriam qua extollaris, et exeas de istis verbis si potes.’ Et ego incepti et conata fui velle habere vanam gloriam, ut probarem si erat verum illud quod dixerat et si Spiritus era Sanctus. Et incepti respicere per vineas ut exirem de illo, scilicet de illa locutione, et ubicumque respiciebam dicebat michi: ‘Ista est mea creatura’. Et sentiebam dulcedinem divinam ineffabilem” (Angela de Foligno 2013, p. 24). “Con estas palabras empezó a dudar mucho y dijo su alma: ‘Si tú fueses el Espíritu Santo no me dirías esto, pues no me conviene ya que soy frágil y, por tanto, podría caer en la vanagloria’. Y respondió: ‘Ahora piensa si tú por todo esto puedes caer en una vanagloria que te hinche. Y huye si puedes de estas palabras’. Y yo me obligué a sentir vanagloria, para probar si era verdad aquello que me había dicho y si esas palabras eran el Espíritu Santo. Y empecé a mirar las viñas, para olvidarme de aquellas palabras, es decir de aquel discurso, y donde quisiera que yo mirase me decía a mí misma: ‘Esta es mi criatura’. Y sentía una dulzura divina inefable.”

8 “Et, ut daret michi securitatem de dubio mmeo, dicebat: ‘Ego sum qui fui crucifixus pro te et habui famem et sitim pro te et sparsi sanguinem meum pro te, tantum te dilexi.’ Et dicebat passionem totam (Angela de Foligno 2013, p. 24). “Y para darme seguridad en mis dudas, decía: ‘Yo soy aquel que fui crucificado por ti y que tuve hambre y sed por ti, y que esparcí mi sangre por ti: tanto te amaba.’ Y así le contaba toda la Pasión.”

9 “Videbam quasi cum oculis corporis et oculis mentis” (Angela de Foligno 2013, p. 38).

10 The episode must ultimately be situated within a broader doctrinal tradition that begins with Augustine of Hippo, who articulated a tripartite theory of vision distinguishing corporeal, spiritual, and intellectual perception (*visio corporalis, spiritualis, intellectualis*), corresponding respectively to sensory sight, the inner apprehension of images, and the direct insight of the intellect: “unum per oculos [...] alterum per spiritum hominis [...], tertium per contuitum mentis” (*De Genesi ad litteram* VI, 386–387; CSEL XXVIII, 3–456). Corporeal, spiritual, and intellectual vision together form a comprehensive Augustinian anthropology and phenomenology of the senses; although the three modes are interrelated, primacy is ultimately granted to intellectual vision. See *De Genesi ad litteram* XII (CSEL XXVIII, 3–456). This conceptual framework subsequently informed medieval elaborations, most notably in the writings of Hugh of Saint Victor and Bonaventure, who reformulated the Augustinian scheme as the doctrine of the three eyes: the bodily eye (*oculus carnis*), the eye of reason (*oculus rationis*), and the eye of contemplation or faith (*oculus contemplationis/oculus fidei*): “Propter quam triplicem visionem triplicem homo accepit oculum, sicut dicit Hugo de sancto Victore, scilicet carnis, rationis et contemplationis.” See: (Bonaventure 1891). Within this hierarchy, sensory perception pertains to the bodily eye, rational cognition to the eye of reason, and the highest spiritual apprehension to the contemplative eye through which divine realities become accessible. As Alois Maria Haas observes, this trichotomy corresponds to the hierarchical structure

of body, soul, and spirit and has functioned as a fundamental organizational schema for conceptions of being in both pre-Christian and Christian thought, constituting a lasting foundation of the Christian cultural worldview (Haas 1999, p. 29).

- 11 “Et tunc in predicta vice, statim quando genuflexi in introitu ecclesie et vidi sanctum Franciscum depictum in sinu Christi, dixit michi: ‘Ita te astrictam tenebo et multo plus 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 si me diliges.’ Et tunc quantumcumque esset verbum 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 dicem ‘quid vidisti?’, ipsa respondit dicens: ‘Vidi rem plenam, maiestatem immensam quam nescio dicere, sed videbatur michi quod erat omne bonum’” (Angela de Foligno 2013, pp. 25–26). “Y esta segunda vez, justo cuando me arrodillé a la entrada de la iglesia y vi a san Francisco pintado en el pecho de Cristo, me dijo: ‘Así de estrecha te tendré abrazada y mucho más de lo que puedas considerar con los ojos corporales. Pero es hora de que cumpla lo que a ti, hija dulce, templo mío, amor mío, te prometí: que como este consuelo he de abandonarte pero que no te dejaré nunca si me amas.’ Y entonces, a pesar de que estas palabras fueron amargas, sentí tanta dulzura que fue intensamente dulcísimo. Y entonces miré como si mirara con los ojos del cuerpo y con los de la mente. Y cuando yo, hermano, le pregunté y le dije: ‘¿Qué viste?’, ella me respondió diciendo: ‘Vi una cosa llena, una majestad inmensa que no puedo expresar, pero yo veía que era el *Omne bonum*.’ Y muchas palabras de dulzura me dijo cuando se marchaba, y con inmensa suavidad, lentamente se marchó, parándose cada poco”.
- 12 “Et tunc post discessum cepi stridere alta voce vel vociferari, et sine aliqua verecundia stridebam clamando et dicebam istud verbum scilicet: ‘Amor non cognitus, et quare?’, scilicet me dimittis. Sed non poteram vel non dicebam plus nisi quod clamabam sine verecundia predictum verbum scilicet: ‘Amor incognite, quare et quare et quare?’” (Angela de Foligno 2013, p. 26). “Y entonces, después de que me abandonara, empecé a gritar en alta voz, o a vociferar. Y sin ninguna vergüenza gritaba y clamaba diciendo estas palabras: ‘Amor no conocido, ¿por qué me dejas?’. Sin embargo, no podía decir nada más que estas palabras que gritaba sin vergüenza: ‘Amor no conocido, y por qué y por qué y por qué’”.
- 13 “Septimo dabatur michi respicere in crucem, in qua videbam mortuum Christum pro nobis. Sed erat adhuc visio insipida, quamvis haberem ibi magnum dolorem” (Angela de Foligno 2013, p. 6). “En el séptimo paso se me permitía ver la cruz, en la que veía Cristo muerto por nosotros. Pero era esta una visión insípida, aunque yo sintiera gran dolor.”
- 14 “Sed in ista cognitione crucis dabatur michi tantus ignis quod, stando iuxta crucem, expoliavi me omnia vestimenta mea et totam me obtuli ei” (Angela de Foligno 2013, p. 6). “Pero en esta comprensión de la cruz recibí tanto fuego que, estando cerca de ella, me despojé de todos mis vestidos y me ofrecí, entera, a Cristo.”
- 15 “Et fui michi instructa et illuminata et demonstrata via crucis isto modo, quia inspiratum est michi quod si ego volebam ire ad crucem expoliarem me ut essem magis levis, et nuda irem ad crucem, scilicet quod parcerem omnibus qui me offendissent et expoliarem me de omnibus terrenis et de omnibus hominibus et feminis et de omnibus amicis et parentibus et de omnibus aliis et de possessione me et de meipsa” (Angela de Foligno 2013, p. 6). “Y la vía de la cruz me fue enseñada, clarificada y mostrada de este modo, es decir que si quería ir a la cruz que me despojase para que fuese más ligera y que caminase desnuda hacia la cruz, es decir, que perdonase a todos los que me habían ofendido y que despojase de todas las cosas terrenales y de todos los hombres y mujeres, y de todos los amigos y familiares, y de todos los demás, y de mi propiedad y de mí misma.”
- 16 “Et dicebat michi ut respicerem in plagas suas, et mirabili modo ostendebat michi quomodo omnia sustinuerat pro me” (Angela de Foligno 2013, p. 7). “Y me decía [el crucificado] que mirase sus llagas y de manera milagrosa me mostraba cómo había soportado todo por mí.”
- 17 “Quadam vice ego eram in vesperis et respiciebam in cruce. Et respiciendo crucifixum oculis corporis, statim tunc subito accensa fuit anima uno amore, et omnia membra corporis sentiebant cum maxima letitia. Et videbam et sentiebam quod Christus intus in me amplexabatur animam cum illo brachio cum quo fuit crucifixus [...] Et gaudebam cum piso tanta letitia et securitate plus quam unquam consueverim” (Angela de Foligno 2013, p. 59). “Una vez estaba en vísperas y miraba a la cruz, y mirando el crucifijo con los ojos corporales, de repente, de manera súbita, se me encendió en el alma un amor y todos los miembros del cuerpo lo sentían con suprema alegría. Y veía y sentía que dentro de mí Cristo me abrazaba el alma con el brazo, con el brazo que fue crucificado [...] Y gozaba de él con gran alegría y seguridad”. The movement from the cross toward union consequently does not end in mere emotional intensity but in a reconfiguration of knowledge itself. As Tomkinson (2004) has argued in her study of Angela’s Trinitarian theology, the experience of the Crucified becomes the privileged path toward deeper participation in divine communion.
- 18 On mystical discourse as the transformation of interior experience into authorized language, see De Certeau (1992). Also: Vanelli (2011).

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