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JULY-AUGUST, 1983

The CORD

A FRANCISCAN SPIRITUAL REVIEW



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Volume 33, No. 7

The CORD

A Monthly Franciscan Spiritual Review

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The CORD (ISSN 0010-8685) (USPS 563-640) is published monthly with the July and August issues combined, by the Franciscan Institute at St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, NY 14778. Editorial offices are at Siena College, Loudonville, NY 12211. Subscription rates: \$10.00 a year; \$1.00 a copy. Second class postage paid at St. Bonaventure, NY 14778, and at additional mailing office.

The drawings for our July-August issue have been furnished by Sister Mary Regina, P.C.P.A., of the Monastery of Sancta Clara, Canton, Ohio.

Standard Abbreviations used in The CORD for Early Franciscan Sources

I. Writings of Saint Francis

Adm: Admonitions	Fragm: Another Fragment, Rule of 1221
BenLeo: Blessing for Brother Leo	LaudDei: Praises of the Most High God
CantSol: Canticle of Brother Sun	LaudHor: Praises at All the Hours
EpAnt: Letter to St. Anthony	OffPass: Office of the Passion
EpCler: Letter to Clerics'	OrCruc: Prayer before the Crucifix
EpCust: Letter to Superiors'	RegB: Rule of 1223
EpFid: Letter to All the Faithful'	RegNB: Rule of 1221
EpLeo: Letter to Brother Leo	RegEr: Rule for Hermits
EpMin: Letter to a Minister	SalBMV: Salutation to our Lady
EpOrd: Letter to the Entire Order	SalVirt: Salutation to the Virtues
EpRect: Letter to the Rulers of People	Test: Testament of St. Francis
ExhLD: Exhortation to the Praise of God	UltVol: Last Will Written for Clare
ExpPat: Exposition on the Our Father	VPLaet: Treatise on True and Perfect Joy
FormViv: Form of Life for St. Clare	'I, II refer to First and Second Editions.

II. Other Early Franciscan Sources

1Cel: Celano, First Life of Francis	LM: Bonaventure, Major Life of Francis
2Cel: Celano, Second Life of Francis	LMin: Bonaventure, Minor Life of Francis
3Cel: Celano, Treatise on Miracles	LP: Legend of Perugia
CL: Legend of Saint Clare	L3S: Legend of the Three Companions
CP: Process of Saint Clare	SC: Sacrum commercium
Fior: Little Flowers of St. Francis	SP: Mirror of Perfection
Omnibus: Marion A. Habig, ed., <i>St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies. English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis</i> (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973).	

EDITORIAL



Existence through Paradox

THAT THE CHURCH is filled with paradoxical statements and paradoxical life-styles is nothing startlingly new. And, since Christ, as founder of the Catholic Church, spoke in paradox and was, indeed, a paradox, one should not be surprised that Francis and Clare of Assisi, staunch followers of Christ, should themselves take on a life of paradox. To be rich for God, one must become poor; to become exalted, one must become lowly; to be filled, one must become empty; to become a light for others, one must brave the darkness; to be accepted by God, one must be rejected by man, and so it goes on.

In the 13th Century, Clare of Assisi stands out as a woman of unusual paradox. While she had been educated in all the very best of social graces, had opportunities to secure for herself a very comfortable family life, and was looked upon as a veritable treasure in appearance and in virtue, she opted to step aside from all of this in favor of a simple, poor, and abject life. Instead of a fine house, she chose the broken down church of San Damiano as her dwelling; she declined marriage vows for the vows of religion; she desired to spend her life in a community of fasting, penance, and enclosure rather than have the joys of raising her own flesh and blood; she longed for poverty and menial tasks in preference to social gatherings and the flattery of friends and acquaintances.

After the death of Francis, Clare found herself regarded not only as the co-worker and co-founder of the second Franciscan Order, but the only really perfect follower of Francis' ideals. Popes, cardinals, and provincials regarded her as a friend and confidante and sought her counsel and her prayers.

With her dying breath, Clare, unlike others who would be sorely concerned for their own salvation, fought for a privilege for her sisters—the Privilege of Highest Poverty—the right to refuse goods; the right to be without a steady income. What could be more paradoxical? And—Clare won the fight! Paradoxically again, this ideal continues to live today. It is this paradox upon which the Poor Clares' life-style is perpetuated, and should it ever be lost one wonders if the Order would also be lost. Ω

*St. Francis and Clare,
O.S.C.*

Saint Colette

Dawn is a recluse
whose radiance,
drawn forth from
her glowing dark,
illuminates the dwindling light
of Francis and Clare;
heals, restores, invigorates—
then gladly fades
into their enduring day.

Sister Mary Agnes, P.C.C.

The Richness of a Father

SISTER MARIE BEHA, O.S.C.

ONLY GOD CAN "afford" to be totally poor. He does not need to have anything in order to be, to be Himself. His own existence is so rich that within Himself He is supremely full.

Such luxury of absolute poverty is not for us. We are too poor, too lacking in being. In order to exist we need to relate: to God, to other persons, to the world of matter. We have to have. And, as a consequence, our poverty can only be relative, not absolute. We are so indigent that even the capacity to be poor must be gift received, rather than possession claimed to be our own.

Our poverty, then, is rooted in our very being as creatures: more dependent than independent, more mendicant than capitalist, empty, rather than filled with being. But such is only one side of created poverty, the dark side, if you will. What Francis and Clare also saw was another side: dependent, we have a claim on inheriting the Kingdom; mendicant, we can receive the largesses of gracious alms; empty, we have a capacity for being filled with the "utter fullness of God" (Eph. 3:19). It "pays" then to be poor, when we look at poverty from the side of the richness of God! Then, acknowledged and accepted, poverty calls forth gratitude and joy, for it opens the door to the richness of transcendence.

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In the pages that follow we hope to explore, first, the acknowledgment and acceptance of poverty; and then the gradual transcendence of it in freedom and joy. In the next section we will reflect on some of the ways in which the contemplative vocation nuances the call of every creature to be, what we really are, poor in and of ourselves but rich beyond measure in Him whom we "dare to call Our Father."

Poverty: Acknowledged and Accepted

WHEN WE SPEAK of accepting our poverty, just what do we mean? The very asking of that question already calls us into the mystery of divine creative love inviting individual response. This truth that we are too poor to possess even the nakedness of bare being must be realized first and then accepted graciously. We are nothing—of ourselves. Not only are we nothing, essentially, but we are also nothing essential! We can lay no claim on being and even the "given" reality that we do exist, are here, does not make our being, our continued existence necessary. The truth is that we are needy and not needed! We don't own anything; we neither are, nor have "private property" that we can rightfully claim as our own.

Having nothing that one can claim as
one's own, that is one side of poverty's
coin. . . .

If we are . . . that we are . . . is pure gift; we are only stewards of what we have received. Once poverty is acknowledged in this way, it can either be accepted with gratitude or rejected in despair, for someone who knows total dependence can choose either to refuse help and give up hope or to reach out to another in trust and in love. The question of poverty's acceptance becomes, then, theological; it leads to faith, hope, and love or to the refusal of helplessness and final despair.

Refusal of our poverty as creatures is close to sin at its origin. We would "be" what we are not. We would say "no" to the truth of ourselves, refusing to obey the law of our being. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Francis' poverty was expressed so repeatedly in terms of obedience's assent. He would obey by saying "yes" to having

nothing of his own.

We say "yes" to this "fact" of our poor existence whenever we live out of it; when we refuse to do so we sin, attempting to claim, to grab for ourselves, to hold on to, what we have no right to possess. Even in sinning, especially in sinning, we remain indigent. The pity is that we try to hold on to something which is not ours and, at the same time, refuse to admit that responsibility which does belong to us, our condition as poor sinners, who are rich in mercy received. Francis and Clare knew better.

Accepting our poverty begins, then, in acknowledged neediness of the creature; it advances if we accept responsibility for our attempts to deny what we need to admit. Any refusal of the truth of our very existence is bound to leave us insecure and uncertain, for then we neither have what we need, nor are free enough to ask for it. Consequently we grow continually more bankrupt; our attempts to stuff the cracks in our being with empty pretense leave us all the poorer, since insecurity which is denied can only lead to more lies, more sin, more total destruction.

Every time we sin, then, we become poorer still in the sense that we cut ourselves off from what we could receive if we were willing to be what we are: persons who are poor. This refusal to be . . . creatures . . . is sin, while the acceptance of our destitution opens the way to holiness. Perhaps this accounts for one of poverty's paradoxes: that great sin, when acknowledged, holds out potential for great holiness; that great holiness deepens one's sense of sin. Witness the title of "unworthy servant" claimed by Francis and Clare and so many saints down the years. The truth is that we are "poor" servants who remain unworthy because we are also sinners.

But all of this is only the one side of acknowledged and accepted poverty. It is the truth of ourselves, but it is not the whole truth. Of ourselves we "have" nothing. But having nothing we are gifted with a capacity for receiving . . . everything, because what we really "have" is a Father who is both rich and generous in His loving. Like Francis, we can then afford to renounce everything, even the clothes that cover our essential nakedness. We can entrust our hungers to the table of the Lord.

Poverty leads, then, to community and to communion. This is its power for transcendence. Once we accept poverty we are free and rich indeed. We are free to relate to other creatures as they really are: gifts given by our Father, expressive of His love for us, to be used by us with reverence and respect and, ultimately, to be returned to Him in

gratitude. We are secure enough not to abuse His gifts by irreverent use; we let be for others what we do not need for ourselves; we appreciate the gift that is offered to us in everything we receive. In short, we grow as Christians, rich in the Spirit of Christ who forms us into true sons and daughters "of the most High King."

Small wonder then that it is a spirit of poverty which opens us to right relationships with all the rest of creation, enabling us to transcend the limits imposed by our own keyhole view of reality-for-us. In a similar way, poverty can bring us into rightful relating with ourselves. We too are gifts and so we can dare to pray, "Make of us an everlasting gift to you." The Giver of all gifts sees us in all our poverty as a gift He wants to receive, even, we might suggest, as a gift He "needs" to receive, so great is His love's desire to share with us. Again it is our very poverty that has brought us into such unbelievable riches. Once we begin to see ourselves as God sees us we are free to go beyond appearances, to respond to ourselves with something of the gentle tenderness of a Father embracing a child in all its fragile weakness.

Growth into such transcendence is a slow process; witness Francis' gradual coming into a more compassionate stance toward his own body. But the seeds of such gracious self-acceptance are already sown in the vision of other creatures seen in all their poverty yet accepted as "sister" and as "brother." The spirit of poverty, finally, brings us into peace. This is so, not only because it allows us to relinquish illegitimate claims of ownership but also because it makes us at one with ourselves. We can let go of more and more of our defenses and become free enough to give ourselves away to others.

The Other who most wants to receive our self-gift is the One who is first the Giver. Here we come to poverty's greatest potential for transcendence. What brings us closest to union? Both Francis and Clare lived the answer: poverty's self-emptying love. This is what they saw in Jesus from crib to cross to Eucharist. He became poor that we might become rich. Our way must be the same as His. Poverty is the means; the goal is greater gift.

Another of poverty's benefits might be this capacity to distinguish its role as means from the absolute goal of union in love. So poor are we that we can even make poverty into a possession. We must resist this temptation to fill our being with any such self-satisfying claim as "we are the poor ones." That is too much ownership. Being poor is also a gift received, never an entitlement. Poverty won't be "had."

True poverty is more call than claim. It is vocational. We are in-

vited to accept its truth. Granted that we refuse only at our peril, still we are never forced, since show of strength or parade of power never opens us to receive. "He humbled Himself" (Phil. 2:7), and in this way He freed us to hear love calling, Be yourself. Be poor. Be loved and know that you are lovely.

Since poverty is vocational, a call to be what we are, its expression is as unique as the individual called. It is many-splendored yet resistant of the capitalism of smug comparison. Francis would be poor in his way; Clare in hers. And we in ours. Women will be poor as men are not; the reverse is also the case. Contemplatives will know their own poverty distinct from the experiences of the apostle. Neither claims the other even by wishing his/her own were different.

The remainder of this article will focus on the ways in which contemplatives, followers of Clare, may live out the uniqueness of their poverty. For it is in doing so that they complement the poverty of others and enrich the Church through their acceptance of this vocation to be "poor ladies" who nuance the Franciscan charism with their contemplative lives.

Contemplative Poverty

IN THE PRECEDING SECTION, we have already indicated that poverty, acknowledged and accepted, brings us into relationship: with God, with ourselves, and with others. This relational character of our poverty places it in a communal context, suggesting that being poor is not just something that concerns individuals but is also a community matter. Consequently, the reflections which follow will focus on the ways in which contemplatives experience poverty both as individuals and as a people called to follow a certain charism incarnated in a particular community. Since individuals and communities differ widely even within the category of contemplative, all the author can hope to do here is to share some reflections on ways in which she has known this call in her own Poor Clare life in the hope that such sharing will evoke response from other contemplatives in the Church.

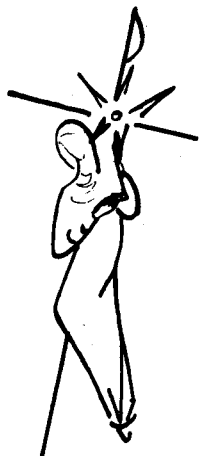
To say that poverty differs from one individual and/or community to another is to suggest again that it is vocational, an aspect of that special gift which invites response from us in all our uniqueness. The Father's call is request more than demand, asking for and, at the same time, making possible our answer. It is also deeply personal, manifesting something of the mystery of His own being and the creative depth of His selective love for this particular human person, this specific community of individuals. Such personal love is in-

comparable, not only in its divine origin, but also in its human expression. To speak, then, of contemplative poverty is not to suggest comparison or contrast, but simply to explore some of the ways in which being poor can be nuanced by the call to contemplative community.

Let us begin with some delineation of this contemplative call in the Church. First of all, I see ours as a life of continuous conversion, a radical living out of the baptismal grace of death to self and rising to new life in Christ. Secondly, this call to union is focused for the contemplative in a very single-minded, absolute sort of way. Thirdly, this life, directed toward "God alone," is lived out in all the existential closeness of solitude in community. Finally, this solitary togetherness is both challenged and supported by a life of ever deepening prayer, moving toward more complete and continuous union.

The call to constant conversion not only marks the beginning of contemplative vocation but also forms the bedrock for the building up of a whole life of listening response to the Lord. In the preceding section, much has already been said about self-knowledge and self-acceptance; contemplative living can only renew and deepen this aspect of the human vocation. But it is not enough simply to know and to accept self, great gift and life-long task though this may be. Weakness and woundedness must also be seen as opportunities, for this is what they truly are. "When we are weak, then we are strong."

Personal inadequacy must be turned into relatedness; that is conversion. And it is this that the contemplative must live out in all its existential dailiness and with all the clear-sighted realism of a life that deliberately offers very few interesting distractions. Personal sinfulness, for example, cannot be evaded with any easy claims of irresponsibility; it must be humbly admitted and turned into a trusting profession of one's need to be forgiven. Such accepting of self as sinner opens the door to receiving the abundance of God's mercy, not only for oneself, but also for the world of fellow sinners. Consequently, realistic self-knowledge binds one into relationship. We need the help of others; we share their sinfulness; we require their forgiveness. Contemplative life cannot afford the luxury of moral superiority or much critical judgment of others. Any we/they mentality must give way to "us sinners"; and this, not just at the comfortable distance of "poor sinners all over the world," but also, and



above all, in the close proximity of neighbors whom one knows only too well.

Growth in personal poverty will then be deeply rooted in a humility that relates one to self and to neighbor. It will also call us into new relationship with God. Not only are we nothing, but He must become God and All! Our trust must be in Him and not in ourselves. Yet, paradoxically, such lack of trust in self can be authentic only when it is the fruit of prior self-acceptance. Inadequate self-confidence is only a counterfeit and promises no lasting fruit in true poverty of spirit.

Letting go of self so that we truly live out of our need of God presupposes sufficient ego-strength to risk relationship, above all to risk moving in the direction of contemplative intimacy. Not only are the poor in spirit the ones who will be blessed with vision of God, but every coming to really "know" Him will inevitably lead to poverty, since it will root us more securely in His love and allow us to let go. We are made poor, then, by Him . . . because of Him . . . for His sake.

Contemplative poverty becomes very single-minded; this is its second characteristic. The attitude that "only one thing is necessary" is bound to leave one poor. It will call for a radical kind of detachment, not only from whatever might cause us to be "care-filled and troubled," but even from anything at all that might become an impediment to our journey of faith into God. Inevitably we will be asked to choose: between control and losing ourselves in love. Once we have chosen and repeated that commitment until it gives shape to all of our life, God will act. The first face His action will wear will be that of impoverishment, and we will not even be allowed the luxury of reckoning up what will be the other "costs."

the "how" of such divine impoverishing is totally His. Ours, simply to receive. So living on alms, as Clare seems to have known so well, is simply an expression of what must become the contemplative's life stance. We trust we will receive what we really need. And what we do receive is what we really need. Ours to keep our eyes fixed on Him and our hands open.

This single-mindedness of contemplative detachment might be summarized in these two postures: eyes open to see; hands open to receive. As Clare delineated the poverty that she wished her daughters to "observe," she did not spell out practices, but only this need to enter into "the poverty and humility of our Lord Jesus Christ." He was poor; so we must be. He had nothing; so we must let ourselves be despoiled of anything that could possess us. Above all, He emptied

Himself; so we must live out that "expropriation" which Clare fought to express in the "privilege" of absolute, radical poverty of possessions. Although contemplative poverty will find appropriate incarnational expression, since this embodiment is essential for it to be called Christian, still these material aspects will not be its primary focus, nor its preoccupation. They will be more a consequence than a concern. Our poverty is more salvational than economic.

What do contemplatives need in order to be among the poor ones who live for "God alone"? The answer is, not much, for He is rich enough to always enrich us. Yet we do have some simple "needs," such is our creatureliness.

"Never more than just enough" might be an appropriate summary for this aspect of contemplative poverty. As Clare expressed it, her sisters were to have just enough garden to provide food for the community and necessary seclusion, but not so much that they could become wealthy farmers. The above criterion seems to exemplify a careful balancing between that degree of plenty which could surfeit the spirit and that level of penury which would result in preoccupation with pressing needs. And it is part of our very poverty that such balancing cannot be achieved once and for all; it must be constantly sought anew in humble dependence on the Spirit's leading.

"To use gratefully but sparingly" might be another way of expressing this nuancing of the incarnational dimension of contemplative poverty. We will need less and less as we grow more secure in our identity as sons and daughters of "our Most High Heavenly Father." Consequently we will be better able to afford letting go, and giving away, because we will also be receiving more—and returning it with grateful praise. In summary, contemplative poverty will be very much concerned with humble receptivity, expressed in reverent appreciation and care-full use.

"Having nothing," then, is proportional to one's realization of being entitled to "possess the Kingdom." And this not only in the end-time but already in the here and the now. How can such radical trust be made practical? Clare found her answer in community, which could incarnate the tenderness of our Father's care, and this brings us to our third characteristic of contemplative poverty. By ourselves we can know both the richness of God's care for us and, at the same time, our radical dependence on others.

With feminine realism, Clare spelled out some of these communal dimensions of contemplative poverty. She herself, even when ill, kept her hands occupied with simple work, letting her stitches become the

mantra for her praise. And she admonished her daughters to devote themselves also to work, but in such a way as not to extinguish the spirit of prayer. But if such were to be possible, they would have to be freed from some of the more demanding aspects of working for one's living, and so Clare also begged from Francis the favor of brothers who would be mendicant for the sake of their Sister Clares. In this way her enclosed daughters were poorer still, since they would depend on others, not only for their material needs, but also for the begging itself which would make their life in enclosed community possible. In such concrete ways the sisters could translate material insecurity into the security of worshipful trust.

But it is not only in terms of material necessities that contemplatives know poverty. Even within community, the members are brought face to face with still other dimensions; so Clare was able to discover signs of the Father's care in the impoverishments of age and illness. The sick, the troubled, the weak, were her special concern; these were her "treasures," and her care showed how precious they were to her.

Youthful strength, rapid increase of numbers, abundance of talent hold their own richness, and contemplative community can expect to be purified of any tendency to place trust in such possessions. Once again "never more than just enough" may summarize the contemplative experience: "just enough" new members to enable the community to continue; "just enough" talent to staff the works of the community and to provide leadership; "just enough" resources to prevent the members from trusting in their own ability to provide for themselves and yet to supply real needs. Contemplative community can expect to grow together through such poverties as unexpected illness, sustained weakness, and the challenges of close living with others who are also suffering members of the Body of Christ.

In these ways, poverty serves to bond community, not only in relation to a provident Father, but also in relationships within community. And this is surely one of its riches that allows the sisters to grow into still greater confidence. Shared ideals, a unique call that is implicitly accepted in all its mysteriousness by others who know that same kind of calling, a respect which both accepts the other's woundedness and also challenges it to become opportunity for growth: such are some of the ways in which poverty in contemplative community is converted into the richness of Kingdom anticipated.

A final characteristic of the contemplative charism which nuances its poverty with that same paschal rhythm is the centrality of its life of prayer. Here we are not speaking so much of the priority given to

times for prayer, but rather of that quality of total dedication which "seeks first the Kingdom" in lived faith that "one thing only is really necessary." Such a "form of life" is essentially theological, nourished and sustained by faith, hope, and love. These baptismal gifts will bind each of the sisters to the others, bringing them together, into greater union with the whole Body of Christ just because of their first being rooted and founded on the love of Father, Son, and Spirit.

Consequently, the theological virtues are at the very heart of contemplative living; they are both its richness and its experience of poverty. Growth in faith, for example, will involve a letting go even of one's spiritual possessions. It is a walking on through darkness and cloud into that night of love which ultimately will give way to the light that is life. Similarly, trust will have its own rhythm of growing impoverishment into final enrichment. Trust in oneself, in one's own capacity for activity, for control, will gradually give way to complete reliance on God, on His power to act, to save. Such transformation is beautiful enough in theory; in practice, it is experienced as diminishment. So too will love be purified through painful impoverishment as the death-resurrection of Jesus is experienced in one's own flesh. Detachment from everything that is not God must be expected and then accepted. Its depth and effectiveness, however, will ultimately go beyond what our minds can expect; what our spirits can accept. "Of ourselves we can do nothing." Only when the contemplative has come to know this in life can love begin to take over completely.

Especially in times of prayer, the contemplative will encounter her own poverty. She will know that she "can't pray"; can't pray as she used to be able to do; can't pray as she would wish she could. No matter. Once again, poverty accepted moves toward transformation. The belief that perseveres beyond doubts, difficulties, temptations becomes a "living faith," i.e., a faith that is lived until it becomes almost-evidence. Hope likewise grows through the security of self-forgetful trust into the joy of confident abandonment. And love slowly, but certainly, changes labor and suffering into fire-tried gold of union.

In all of these experiences of prayer-filled growth into the Lord, what the contemplative will know first is the impoverishment of the "self." It is the "I," that dearest of possessions, which must die so that Jesus may live. Such is the deepest, truest meaning of that "expropriation" which Clare saw as her sisters' dearest privilege.

Holding on to nothing, having nothing that one can claim as one's own, that is one side of poverty's coin. On the other side is the face of Christ. Ω

The Assumption

Assumpta est Maria in coelum!
Lo! Heaven's portals opened wide!
Then Christ, the Living Savior
Was there by Mary's side!

Sweet, tender words were spoken,
(And all Heaven listened in)
but none could e'er betoken
the depth of love wherein
He cried: "Madonna mia!
At last, Madonna mia!

Sister M. Colette Logue, O.S.F.

Books Received

- Marsh, Jack, *You Can Help the Alcoholic: A Christian Plan for Intervention*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1983. Pp. 88. Paper, \$2.95.
- McDonagh, Enda, *The Making of Disciples: Tasks of Moral Theology*. Theology and Life Series, n. 3. Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1983. Pp. x-221. Paper, \$12.95.
- McNamara, Martin, M.S.C., *Palestinian Judaism and the New Testament*. Good News Studies, n. 4. Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1983. Pp. 279, including Index. Paper, \$10.95.
- Odell, Catherine and William, *The First Human Right: A Pro-Life Primer*. Introd. by John Powell, S.J. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Press, 1983. Pp. 92, including bibliography. Paper, \$4.95.
- Roberts, William P., *Marriage: Sacrament of Hope and Challenge*. Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1983. Pp. viii-136. Paper, \$4.75.
- Rogers, Barbara J., *In the Center: The Story of a Retreat*. Introd. by George A. Maloney, S.J. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1983. Pp. 157. Paper, \$4.95.

Woman Most Powerful

SISTER MARY FRANCIS HONE, O.S.C.

THE LEGEND OF Saint Clare of Assisi¹ reads like a story of Jesus, and so it should. Hagiographical accounts written for the canonization of a saint followed a consistent methodology by which a person's likeness to Christ was made evident. This restricted perspective tends, however, to leave us feeling personally impoverished of the stuff of such a state of wholeness. Even more so do we set aside the great cloistered mystics when considering patterns for our own journey into God, but they are, and remain always, "ardent centers of a spreading light" (Underhill, 133). Clare was one of these.

The Word found a home in this humble woman of Medieval Italy who walked in the garden of the Gospels and under the direction of the Holy Spirit gathered a bouquet of values and relationships which has manifested this Word in a particular way. Her spirituality is eminently one with Saint Francis', and yet it remains also a distinctly Clarian form of Gospel living which has drawn countless women to live the redemptive mission of Jesus within her ideals of poverty and prayer.

¹Authorship attributed to Thomas of Celano but recently considered to be Anonymous.

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Clare's way to God is one among many and bears the limitations it must inevitably have, for no one can hope to live all the dimensions of the Gospel message. But among the saints of the cloister she was a pioneer of the high places of the spirit who gave herself totally to the Church and to the world in exposing her intimate union with God in order to light our path there. In a painting by Rubens she stands in the center of the Doctors of the Church having been considered one of the great teachers of the thirteenth century. Her doctrine is an unfailing guide to the mystical life based upon the condition of absolute poverty which enables us to "heed only the hidden things of God" (CL 36; Brady, 43).

By searching the traditional sources it may be possible to enliven our appreciation of the example Clare has left us and to learn from this leader of women who has assumed a place in history as "one of the strongest and most beautiful characters of all time" (Walsh, 320). In her father's house she was "a little ray, but in the cloister, like the brilliance of lightning!" (Bull of Canonization; Brady, 105).

The Little Ray

THE SEED OF HER calling to a life of intense prayer may be discerned even during the youth of the lovely, golden-haired Chiara. Her mother, Ortolana, seems to have supplied for her a positive religious formation. Gradually she absented herself from the frivolities of her social peers and sought out more time for prayer and seclusion. Evidently influenced by the Desert Fathers and Reformed Cistercians, she organized for herself a form of living which included, besides long periods of prayer and meditation, the practices of monastic asceticism and the denial of such personal pleasures as dainty foods to help the poor she loved so much. We might even smile as she imitates the monk's custom of counting her Pater Noster Psalter with pebbles instead of using the chaplets which were available and in common use at that time.

Spiritual leaders like Clare stand tall
and strong throughout the ages with a
reminder for us who search for
guidance. . . .

Since Clare was renowned as a beautiful and compassionate lady who kept all the commandments, we may wonder at her grateful references to her "conversion." But wasn't that really where life had blossomed for her, where a part of her had come alive of which she may never have been fully conscious before that day when she first heard Francis speak of God's love? This is a good place to begin our brief study: with the awakening of Saint Clare.

Although conversion may aptly describe that meeting and its consequences, the term awakening more adequately describes the new experience of God which she received on this occasion. Much has been revealed in the few words: The joys of heaven were opened to her. When the heavens had opened for Jesus it marked a deeper grasp of his identity in relation to the Father and a realization of his calling. For Clare it proved the birthing of a courageous woman whose inner stirrings could no longer hide beneath soft satins.

Nothing on earth compared with this experience; it was a deeply felt movement involving the whole person; it made her long to know its Source (cf. CL 6; Brady, 22). Such a profound broadening of the spirit dimension is a surety irrevocably engraved upon the faculties, and it resulted in an inner security enabling her to see her direction more clearly and to make a commitment to pursue that end. So sure and satisfying had been the taste she had received that she determined to make every effort to sound the depths of such a Reality. Francis discerned the designs of the Spirit in her regard and instructed her concerning espousal union with Jesus and the tastelessness of all the world could offer her in comparison with the fullness of such a love relationship.

But this episode of discovery and resurrection had to have been preceded by a searching loneliness we seldom think to ascribe to those so privileged, for without a vacant space in the core of our being the joys of enlightenment can never be. The mysterious fullness which now settled within her had required a place prepared to receive it as well as a willingness to remain empty and without answers. Many deaths would have to clear the way for the invasion of God still to come; and this essential emptying which poverty is, Clare would claim as the foundation of her prayer and that of the Order she founded with Francis.

The Lampstand

THE SAME SPIRIT that commissioned Francis to rebuild his Church had a task for Clare too: a role that cannot be filled by everyone because

of the other necessary functions, but one which must be performed in order to maintain the Church on its course. Saint Peter Damien has described the apostolate entrusted to the contemplative Orders as that of a lighthouse casting forth its light while remaining in one place (Wolter, p. 653). Francis dearly revered such a life of prayer, and he carefully nurtured this seed sown in Clare's heart. She became his creation in the Spirit, and under his guidance she proceeded to establish a form of poverty, prayer, and seclusion unknown for women before her. She infused a feminine balance into Francis' dream of Gospel living: the willingness to remain hidden as the life-giving heart of the Franciscan Family so that the ministry of the Friars might be fruitful—the inherent necessity to BE for God rather than DO for God, and the desire to give oneself to one Love and become like the loved One.

Yes, Clare has much to teach us, especially that freedom is not synonymous with mileage; that the spirit becomes free when it finds Truth and gives itself to that Truth forever; and that joy is the fruit of such a spirit in God. Indeed she would now be free, nor would her light be hidden but, rather, submitted to the discipline of a lampstand so that it might shine with truer, clearer brightness. There was a modern mystic who understood the love of a person like Clare, and he wrote:

Why, when you stretched out nets to imprison me, should I have thrilled with greater joy than when you offered me wings? It is because the only element I hanker after in your gifts is the fragrance of your power over me, and the touch of your hand upon me. For what exhilarates us human creatures more than freedom, more than the glory of achievement, is the joy of finding and surrendering to a beauty greater than man; the rapture of being possessed [Teilhard, p. 122].

The Brilliance of Lightning

CLARE LEARNED TO PRAY by looking deeply into Jesus. He was ever in her thoughts. It is precisely by observing the process of her growth in prayer that we can learn from this remarkable woman who consistently pointed beyond herself to the One she loved with all her heart.

In contemplating the immeasurable love of her Savior, poor and crucified, she often wept compassionately. In her Biography the chapter on her prayer focuses on these tears, not uncommon in medieval Italian temperaments, which would seem connatural to one as accepting as Clare of her own humanness, one so capable of in-

timacy and therefore able to proceed to a wholesome development of her spiritual capacity. It is our senses that train and prepare us for spirit-living and for the prayerful perceptions which are in actuality deeply felt movements requiring sensitivity.

Nor did Clare escape our sinfulness; rather, she struggled in her own woundedness. As her inner light grew stronger, darkness was allowed equal time. One day at prayer she was tempted to fear its intensity; afraid that she would become blind if she continued to identify herself with the suffering Christ in her prayer, yet still determined and unshakable in her ardor, she made her choice: "He will not be blind who shall see God!" (CL 19; Brady, 32). her strong reply could not erase the degree of effort required for someone to have come to that point where selfishness did not control her decisions, for the Face of God was all she longed for. As Saint John of the Cross has explained, our humanness will always crave something to hold onto, to the very end, and most of all, our natural gifts.



Gory images accompanied the next, more violent attack: Clare would lose her brain and her beauty! The treasures of intelligence and loveliness! Were these the thin thread preventing the risk of her next step toward God? Spiritual writers of the Middle Ages instructed their readers by presenting an event rather than by expounding abstractions, and in Clare's final answer we are given a description of great love: "Nothing can harm one who wants only to do God's will!" (Ibid.; Brady, 33*). She had outgrown the tyranny of the ego which prevents our reaching out towards others and the Other, and now she was free to please only her Spouse. This integration, painfully achieved, enabled her to guide others to similar holiness. In her instruction to them we may learn the personal conviction passed on to them: "My sisters, never desire to possess anything else under heaven" (Rule of St. Clare, 7.2; Brady, 75). She taught them to live as women consecrated to God with all their being: "Look at him (use your imagination), think of him (use your intellect), contemplate him (with all your heart), and desire to be like him" (Second Letter to Agnes, 3; Brady, 92*).

Although the employment of all our human powers, as necessary to our growth in union with God, has been common enough teaching among the Doctors of the Church (cf. Bonaventure, *Tree of Life*, ed. Cousins, 119), Clare has added the desire of likeness to the Poor Crucified, possible only in the highest union of wills attainable. There is no loftier mystical doctrine than her exhortation to total immersion of oneself in the humanity of Christ.

The authenticity of her interior prayer was manifested within the community of the Poor Sisters where, with the balance of a true Christian mystic, she tolerated no laxity. She herself radiated joy always but particularly after a prolonged period of contemplation off in her favorite spot. Inadvertently her shining countenance brought her enjoyment of Jesus to her sisters, who looked forward just to seeing her. Listening to the warmth of her words served to rekindle their hearts with greater love and fidelity in their vocation. Clare's joy overflowed also in her letters to Agnes of Bohemia:

Happy is she to whom it is given to attain this life with Christ; to cleave with all one's heart to him whose beauty all the heavenly hosts behold forever, whose love inflames our love, whose contemplation is our refreshment, whose graciousness is our delight, whose gentleness fills us to overflowing, whose remembrance gives sweet light . . . [Fourth Letter to Agnes, 2; Brady, 96].

The visions and dreams which have been recorded only attest to the humanness that needs support and encouragement in the search for happiness along the dark roads of faith-filled contemplation. Image and symbol held a prominent position in the spiritual life before the era of intellectualism, and these movements of the unconscious were considered to be normal manifestations of the Spirit.

Clare was outstanding for her abiding sense of God's presence and her uninterrupted prayer which assumed many forms familiar to us. In Scripture and Liturgy she drew the sustenance for her prayer, and there is much evidence of her familiarity with the spiritual classics. She was careful to maintain through silence an atmosphere of openness to the workings of the Spirit in herself and her sisters. She prayed freely and spontaneously, and still she treasured certain set prayers, especially those Francis composed for her.

All of life became holy for her and was gathered into her one Love. Shortly before her death we find an example of this simple, undivided love of a mystic. Unable to join the sisters for the midnight Office on

Christmas Eve, she both saw and heard, in some extraordinary way, the entire celebration of the Friars at the Cathedral a mile away. In the morning the sisters gathered around her bed to hear: "I have . . . heard all the solemnities that this night were sung in the Church of Saint Francis!" (CL 29; Brady, 39). It may be difficult for us to understand, but hearing God being praised was the cause of her joy, and for her it could not be otherwise because of the state of habitual union in which she had lived by this time so near her death. We also know that there were many occasions when she taught them "that for every human being they saw, and for every creature, always and in all things God must be praised!" (de Robeck, 223).

Whenever she received the Body of Christ she was totally gathered into that moment and drawn beyond herself into God. We also find mention of ecstasy when she meditated upon the sufferings of Jesus, but there is one account which stands apart. One Good Friday she was held in a rapture which lasted a day and a night, and she appeared to be crucified with her Spouse. Finally awakened in obedience by a concerned sister, Clare responded: "Blessed was this sleep, dearest sister, for long have I desired it and now it has been given to me. But do not tell anyone of this sleep as long as I shall live" (CL 31; Brady, 41*). With this she left an embrace which required great strength merely to endure and which had been prepared for by years of self denial and many sufferings. Only the cross can clear a path to the core of our being and thereby expand our capacity for the touches of God. The answer Clare gave would certainly point to an extended absence of such consolations in her spiritual life and very possibly marked the termination of a long and dark night for her spirit.

Clare's mystical doctrine is clearly revealed in this account: always, the door to transcendent union is Jesus, Poor and Crucified. Always, the poverty, humility, and unspeakable love of the Word both for our imitation and for our contemplation, then our transformation into God:

Place your mind before the mirror of eternity, place your soul in the brightness of God's presence, place your love in the figure of the Divine Substance and transform your whole self, through contemplation, into the image of the Godhead, that you too may feel what his friends feel in tasting the hidden sweetness which God himself has kept from the beginning for those who love him [Third Letter to Agnes, 3; Brady, 94*].

Clare gave herself totally to him who is Truth and came to know

this same Truth in its consummate simplicity within herself. This is the greatest accomplishment in this world and for this world: the union of the human spirit with God! The very power of God, her True Self, became her own in a spiritual marriage of her will with God's, and the fruit of this union was poured out for others. Francis knew of her great holiness and sent his brothers to her for healing by her prayerful intercession and the mark of her Beloved which she traced over them . . . the cross. She compassionately helped all who came to her while her own uninterrupted pain she bore cheerfully and without ever a complaint from her lips.

The power of her prayer scattered warring armies, while political figures sought out her advice and arbitration. Bishops, Cardinals, and Popes went to San Damiano to hear her speak of God and be fortified and guided by her prayer and her counsel concerning the Church. People of many countries acclaimed her to be the "Footprint of the Mother of God" (CL, prol.; Brady, 18) and considered her to have surpassed all other women.

The impact she had on the world was overwhelming even though she never left her monastery. Before she died there were already 120 Poor Clare Monasteries to carry on her mandate: "I hold you to be a co-worker of God himself and a support for the weak and failing members of his Glorious Body" (Third Letter to Agnes, 3; Brady, 93).

Spiritual leaders like Clare stand tall and strong throughout the ages with a reminder for us who search for guidance:

[By] humility, the power of faith and the strong arms of poverty [we] lay hold of that incomparable treasure hidden in the field of the world and in the hearts of people with which is bought that through which all things have been made from nothing [Ibid.].

Through her total commitment to a Gospel life of prayer for the sake of the Kingdom in imitation of Jesus, Clare became an "unmoving light between the universe and God" (Teilhard, 135), a living flame of that seraphic love which mounts to the very heights of intimate knowledge of God!

There is an ancient Eastern scripture which seems to sing of Clare: "Women, when consecrated to Truth, become most powerful daughters of God!" (Elenjimitam, 73). Ω

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Letter of Saint Bonaventure to the Abbess and Sisters of the Monastery of St. Clare in Assisi

TRANSLATED BY GREGORY SHANAHAN, O.F.M.

TO HIS BELOVED DAUGHTERS in Christ Jesus, the abbess of the Poor Ladies of Assisi at the monastery of Saint Clare, and to all the Sisters thereof, Brother Bonaventure, Minister General and servant of the Order of Friars Minor, sends greetings: to you who associate with those holy virgins who follow as the Lamb's attendants, wherever he goes (Rev. 14:4).

It was recently I learned from our dear brother Leo, onetime companion of the holy father, how intent you are on serving the poor crucified Christ in all purity of heart, like spouses of the eternal King. I rejoiced greatly in the Lord over this; so much that I now wish, in this letter, to offer every encouragement to that devotion of yours. So may you earnestly walk in the virtuous footprints of your holy Mother, who, through the instrumentality of the little poor man Saint Francis, was schooled by the Holy Spirit. "Wish never to have anything else under heaven," except what that Mother taught, namely, *Jesus Christ and him crucified* (RegB 6.6; 1 Cor. 2:2). After her example, hasten, dear daughters, after the fragrance of his precious blood. Be bold enough to take hold of the mirror of poverty, the pattern of humility, the shield of endurance, the inscription of obedience. Then, catching fire from divine love, give your heart totally to him who on the cross offered himself to the Father for us. This will mean you emerge as the incense of Christ the Virgin's Son, the Spouse of wise virgins, as you diffuse the scent of all the virtues, making manifest both those who are achieving salvation and those who are on the road to ruin (2 Cor. 2:15). For garments you will have the light of your Mother's example; you will be on fire with those delightful burning gleams that last forever.

Father Gregory Shanahan, of the Irish Province of the Friars Minor, is a Consulting Editor of this Review. He has collaborated in a recent Irish language edition of the writings of Saint Francis and specializes in retreats to religious and mission preaching in Ireland and Britain. The present Letter is translated from Bonaventure's Ep. VII, the Latin text of which can be found in the *Opera Omnia*, VIII, 473-74.

Yours will be such a continuous vigil of yearning love, and you will be so aglow with the spirit of devotion, that when the cry is raised, the Bridegroom is on his way, the lamps of your mind will be already filled with the oil of charity and of joy, so that you may go to meet him happily. While foolish virgins are left outside, you will go in with him to the wedding and eternal joyfulness (Mt. 25:1ff.). There Christ will make his spouses sit down with his angels and elect, and minister to them, offering them the bread of life, meat which is that of the Lamb slain, roast fish which was cooked on the cross upon the fire of love, that burning love with which he loved you (Rev. 5:6; Lk. 9:14; 12:37; 24:42). And then he will give you a cup of spiced wine, that is, of his humanity and divinity. It is from this that friends drink, and from which, though wondrously retaining their sobriety, loved ones drink deep (Cant. 8:2; 5:1). You will go on enjoying that store of goodness once reserved for those who fear God (cf. Ps. 30:20). Your constant gaze will be on him who is not only the fairest of the children of men, but the fairest also among the thousands of angels (Ps. 44:2). Why, it is upon him that angels desire to look; for he is the brightness of eternal light, and the unspotted mirror of God's majesty and the radiance of the glory of paradise (1 Pet. 1:2; Wis. 7:26; cf. Heb. 1:3).

And so, my beloved daughters, as you continually cleave to God who is our possession of perpetual value, and when he blesses you with favors, commend a sinful man like me to his unspeakable indulgence. Keep up your prayers, so that for the glory and honor of his wondrous name, he will be good enough to guide my steps mercifully, so as to further the welfare of that poor little flock of Christ committed to my care (Ps. 118:133).

GIVEN ON the holy mountain of La Verna.¹ Ω

¹In 1259 Saint Bonaventure was on La Verna (in the Prologue of the *Itinerarium* he says he came there about the beginning of October—n. 2). At the time, Brother Leo, Blessed Giles, and other companions of Saint Francis were still living.

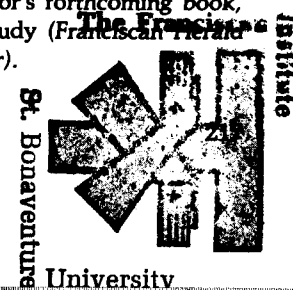
See How They Loved One Another

SISTER MARY SERAPHIM, P.C.P.A.

"DO NOT BELIEVE that I do not love them!" exclaimed Francis when his brothers chided him for what seemed to them his excessive reticence in visiting Clare and her sisters at San Damiano. The curious double negative of this statement reflects either Francis' or Celano's awareness that the relationship between Francis and Clare was certain to be misunderstood and misinterpreted, not only by their contemporaries but by every succeeding age in which their story would be told. They were not wrong.

In our own era there has been a typical variety of interpretations of this famous friendship. We have the erotic intimacy of a Nikos Kazantzakis, the fanciful imaginings of a Murray Bodo, the healthy but brief analysis of a Chesterton, and the simple "conspiracy of silence" maintained by some authors who apparently feel the subject is too hot to handle. Some writers attempt to present their relationship as so "spiritual" that Francis, whose passionate humanity is his most appealing characteristic, becomes in Clare's presence a platonic, emotionless being. Clare, for her part, has been portrayed as such an ethereal being that her relationship to this earth is questionable.

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This may explain why she, who was one of the staunchest followers of Francis during the most critical period of the Order, has been largely overlooked as a source of true Franciscan spirituality. The strong, vibrant, astute, and beautiful woman that she was has been largely lost through the centuries in Franciscan literature. A firsthand reading of the sources would easily disclose the caliber of this remarkable woman who grasped the fullness of Francis' inspiration perhaps more keenly than any other of his disciples. The sources also reveal that Clare understood Francis so well because she loved him so well.

The deep and fruitful love which
Francis and Clare cherished for each
other was a rare gift from heaven.

Yet the true picture of Clare and Francis' relationship is admittedly difficult to perceive and portray. Their friendship appeared ambiguous even to their closest companions, if Celano and the author of the *Fioretti* can be believed. Francis felt a dual responsibility toward Clare and the Poor Ladies. On the one hand, he was convinced that since he had called Clare and the other sisters to join in his adventure of following Lady Poverty, he and his brethren were obliged as true knights to provide them with both spiritual and material sustenance.

On the other hand lay his awareness of the abuses to which this relationship could give occasion if all the Poor Ladies were not of Clare's stature and all the friars not as nobly inclined as he. In their own time, at least one other poverty movement, that of the Poor Men of Lyons, had been condemned by the Holy See because of the suspicious relationship between the men's and women's groups. Francis realized that his own conduct would often be cited as the norm for others, and therefore he chose to act with more than ordinary circumspection in Clare's regard.

Clare and Francis had grown up in the same city, but the difference in their family's social status meant that they probably never had done more than pass one another in the street. Although they would have been baptized at the same font in the cathedral, this being the only one in the city, they would have worshipped in different churches. Clare's family would have attended the cathedral of San Rufino which dominated the quarter where the wealthy lived, while Francis' parents

would have gone to San Nicolo's, patron of merchants, whose church stood in their district.

When Francis was in his teens, he had enthusiastically taken part in the uprising which had put the *minores* temporarily in power in Assisi and had driven the noble class families into exile. Clare would have been about four and probably lived with her family in Perugia until she was nearly ten. By the time she returned to her hometown, Francis was on the verge of his withdrawal from the social life of the city. The adolescent Clare may have gone with her mother to the Bernardone cloth shop, but it is a moot question if they were ever waited on by Pietro's elder son.

The first known meetings between Clare and Francis took place around the time Francis preached a series of Lenten exhortations in the cathedral. Clare would have been about seventeen and Francis close to thirty. Clare's first biographer intimates that Clare had already heard a good bit about Francis and was powerfully attracted to his ideals. Francis, likewise, seems to have had a high esteem for this beautiful and virtuous daughter of one of Assisi's leading families. Their desire to see and speak to each other was mutual.

Customs of the period, however, created problems. Clare could not leave her home unaccompanied nor be seen speaking to a man, whatever his rank or calling, in a public place. Possibly her cousin, Rufino, who was one of the first of Assisi's young men to join Francis, paved the way for their meeting. After that, we are told, they found ways to meet frequently. Either Francis would arrange to see Clare in some place where she could go without arousing suspicion or, more often, Clare would go out of the city with a companion who agreed to keep her secret. Francis, with Brother Philip as his ally and guarantor of propriety, would speak to Clare of the dream and burning ideals which inspired his strange mode of life. Clare listened and responded so perfectly that Francis felt a wondrous certainty that she, too, was being inwardly directed along the same path he had begun to walk.

After some months, Clare was begging him to tell her when and how she could embark on this grand adventure whose promise shimmered like a flaming beacon in Francis' eyes. There is no definite evidence that Francis consulted Bishop Guido, but the sequence of events on Palm Sunday in the year 1212 presupposes that Francis had sought ecclesiastical permission to receive Clare into his Order.

Francis' innate sense of drama came to the fore when he directed Clare to appear in all her finery at Mass on Palm Sunday and then, still adorned in the glowing color and flashing jewels of her bride-like

attire, to slip from her father's house by the light of the Paschal moon. Outside the city walls, Francis and his brothers met her and escorted her in a torchlight procession through the woods to the tiny chapel of the Portiuncula. There she exchanged her fine raiment for rough, undyed jazzo, allowed her wealth of blond hair to be shorn to the roots, and hid her beauty beneath a shapeless veil. Francis then took her to a Benedictine community where she could not only be instructed but also protected from the fury of her family.

Only by claiming the right of sanctuary did Clare frustrate their effort to restore this errant daughter to the family circle. Clare signified the totality of her break with her family by tearing off her veil to reveal the shorn head of a consecrated nun. She then proceeded to dispose of all the property and goods which constituted her dowry and gave the money to the poor as Francis had instructed her. Clare was astute enough to refuse to sell any of it to family members eager to keep the estates intact, for she felt she might be depriving the landless peasants of an opportunity to better their condition if the vast tracts of Offreduccio property remained in her family's control.

As soon as Clare was settled into San Damiano, probably in May of 1212, Francis and his brothers did all they could to provide for her and the women who soon began to join her. Although Clare looked to Francis for directives about developing the community, he gave her only the few Gospel passages which inspired his brotherhood and his impassioned exhortations to love Lady Poverty. Gradually Clare assumed for Francis the visible expression of this mystical Lady who claimed his total allegiance.

Clare's entrance into the Franciscan movement highlighted certain latent aspects within the original charism. Her quiet feminine presence, receptive and trusting, accented the contemplative posture of a little poor one before the Lord, waiting upon His initiative with ready will and serene confidence. Her lifestyle affirmed the necessary partnership between contemplative prayer and apostolic ministry. The close community life which developed within San Damiano also reminded the brothers of the importance of cultivating genuine love and supportiveness among themselves.

Clare's presence at San Damiano became a lodestar to which Francis turned frequently as darkening shadows began to blot out the sunlit joy of the first days of his tryst with Lady Poverty. It is easier to see what Clare received from Francis than what he received from her. Yet their relationship rather quickly shifted from that of inspired guide and devoted disciple to one of mutual support and discreet direction.

If Clare looked to Francis as the one who, after God, was her pillar and support, Francis looked to Clare as one through whom the hidden will of his Lord could be transmitted to him. In his darkest hours, it was to Clare that Francis turned. When he was torn between the attractions of solitary prayer and the needs of the people who flocked to hear him, Francis sent Brother Masseo to Brother Sylvester and Sister Clare. They were to pray and then convey to him the answer to his dilemma which he was certain the Lord would make known to them.

When Francis saw his brethren being torn away from him and divided by dissensions he was powerless to resolve, he began to doubt his fidelity to the responsibility the Lord had laid upon him. Under obedience, he was sent by his Vicar to preach to the Poor Ladies at San Damiano. He went but knew there were no words in his heart to give them. So he simply stood there in silence, allowing his inner emptiness to be visible to the compassionate and loving gaze of Clare. Finally he sprinkled ashes about him and prayed as he had never done before the penitent, trusting words of Psalm 51. Though he left without saying a personal word to Clare, he was strengthened in the sure knowledge that she had penetrated that lonely place where he felt so bereft of human consolation and was standing strong and luminous in his darkness.

Finally, when he had been so weakened by the endless pain of the stigmata, by the chronic inflammation of his eyes which made the light of heaven intolerable to him, and by his debility caused by serious stomach ailments, it was to San Damiano that he turned. Once in Clare's peaceful domain, he admitted he could go on no more and gratefully submitted to her ministrations. It was no mere coincidence that the Canticle of Brother Sun was born when Francis lay, empty and exhausted, in Clare's little garden. Here he reached that moment of complete surrender when grace could invade him with its total transforming power.

Francis was enabled, through Clare's spiritual and physical closeness, to make what is the typically feminine response to God's initiative, that of surrender and acceptance. Francis' always literal and active interpretation of the Gospel life was completed by Clare's no



less literal but receptive response to the Gospel message. He, the man for others, needed her who simply heard the Word of God and treasured it in her heart.

A strong feminine element is discernible in Francis from his earliest days and was the source of his love for song, poetry, rich garments, and all that was good and beautiful. After his conversion, Francis seems to have developed a fear of this aspect of his nature, regarding it as an almost demonic temptress. Ruthlessly he denied himself the delights he once savored so deeply. But in Clare he discovered the natural and harmonious woman. Her spontaneous femininity spoke to him. Through his association with her, his own feminine side was educated and eventually released from his fear that its expression threatened the totality of his commitment to his Lord.

Conversely, Clare was brought into healthy contact with a man who did not believe that power, prestige, and money were requisites for a happy life as did the seven knights in her immediate kinship. Clare's own masculine qualities are revealed in her direct focus on essentials and single-minded pursuit of any goal she set for herself, as well as the creative way she worked with Francis' original vision, adapting it to the specialized form in which she felt called to express it.

These gifts might have made of her a masculinized woman, seeking to dominate her environment by sheer force of will. In Francis, however, she saw these typical masculine traits employed in the service of others. She learned through her association with him how to direct these gifts with discernment and clear awareness so that she did not attempt to remake others, albeit for their own good, or, still worse, to subtly use them, which would have been a subversion of her own femininity. Francis was for Clare her Guide and Illuminator, one who enabled her to see what was stirring in diffuse and inarticulate longing in her own soul. She spoke of him as her Father and Support and gratefully leaned on him, cherishing his pledge to care always for her and her sisters as an indispensable right, one she would allow no one, not even a pope, to take from her.

Francis' reverent appreciation of Clare as his ideal woman enhanced Clare's own appreciation of her womanhood. She, in her turn, did the same for him especially by reinforcing his faith in his call and mission to lead and inspire others. Clare became more finely woman, and Francis more fully man, through the profound and intimate relationship which was forged between them. Clare became for Francis a link with the treasures in his own depths which she unconsciously embodied for him. She exercised a gentling influence on the sometimes

harsh demands he made on himself and others, humanizing, as it were, the stark, straightforward idealism which possessed him by endowing it with a certain flexibility and compassion.

The dark moods which so often seized upon Francis with such terrifying intensity arose from his, as yet, unintegrated femininity. Clare taught him how to break out of these emotional abysses, not by violence but through gentle laughter at the too-great seriousness which evoked them. Through her mediation he came to establish a friendly partnership with this once frightening and disturbing element in his nature.

The only catalyst which allows such transformation to occur is love. One of the clearest revelations of the depth and quality of their mutual love occurred when Francis lay dying at the Portiuncula in October, 1226. Clare herself became so grievously ill at this same time that it was feared she too was dying. Clare was utterly unable to reconcile herself to the thought that she would never see Francis again and wept bitterly. Finally she sent a message to him telling him how desperate she felt at the thought of losing his companionship. The Legend of Perugia describes Francis' reaction to her heartbroken message with phrases reminiscent of John's description of Jesus' love for Martha and Mary of Bethany. "Francis was moved with compassion for he loved Clare and her sisters." He sent her an affectionate and consoling note with his own blessing and a promise that she would see him again and be greatly comforted.

One thing which enabled Clare to survive Francis' death was her loyal realization that she had a very important task to fulfill—the preservation of Francis' ideals in their fullest vigor and purity. For the next thirty years, Clare maintained an uncompromising stand on the matter of poverty while almost the entire First Order was seeking privileges from the Holy See which would guarantee them everything but poverty and minority.

Clare seems to have had only one fear after she lost the most important and beloved person in her life. She feared that she might betray the trust he had given her. In her Testament, Clare expresses her preoccupation about remaining faithful to Most High Poverty and speaks of the

frailty which we feared in ourselves after the death of our holy Father Francis, he who was our pillar of strength and, after God, our one consolation and support. Thus time and again, we bound ourselves to our Lady, most holy Poverty, so that, after my death, the sisters present and to come would never abandon her.

Clare consistently and vigorously refused any and all mitigations which were almost forced upon her by the Cardinal Protectors or the popes themselves. In 1228, she wheedled Pope Gregory IX into renewing the Privilege of Poverty she had obtained from Innocent III in 1216, although Gregory had visited San Damiano with the express intention of releasing her from it.

Until her death Clare fought for the right to base the Rule of the Poor Ladies on that of the Friars. After several unacceptable Rules had been composed for her by well meaning prelates, Clare realized that she alone could write the Rule which would express the original inspiration on which her Order was based. It did not daunt her that women in those days did not write Rules and get them approved—that this was a *job* for canonists, all of whom were men! Clare wrote her Rule and saw it approved less than forty-eight hours before her death. Only after she had kissed the Papal Seal could she die in peace, knowing that she had kept her tryst with Lady Poverty and with Francis.

The deep and fruitful love which Francis and Clare cherished for one another was a rare gift from heaven. They knew this and were profoundly grateful. This gift was given them, not just for their own joy and growth in holiness but as a gift for the entire Franciscan family which was born of their mutual fidelity to God and to each other. As Saint Paul says of the mutual love of a married couple: "This is a great foreshadowing; I mean that it refers to Christ and the Church." Ω

Soft Footsteps

Soft footsteps in the still of the night;
loving eyes noticing a shiver—
Gentle hands bestowing a warm cover
to ward off the chill.
The candle is out now . . . but the life remains
as other footsteps and other eyes
Pierce the darkness in search of that
love which Clare bestowed.

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