

# The CORD

## A FRANCISCAN SPIRITUAL REVIEW

### ARTICLES

- CLARE OF ASSISI: A LIGHT TO THE WORLD ..... 198  
*Violet Grennan, O.S.F.*
- "GO FORTH SWIFTLY" ..... 211  
*Sr. Marie Beha, O.S.C.*

### FEATURES

- POVERTY ... AS A POSITIVE ATTITUDE ..... 193  
*Sr. Frances Ann Thom, O.S.F.*
- POETRY:
- THE SECRET OF THE GOLDEN FLOWER ..... 197  
*William Hart McNichols, S.J., S.F.O.*
- TWO AUGUST FAILURES ..... 222  
*Anthony Chiarilli*



# The CORD

## A Monthly Franciscan Spiritual Review

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## Standard Abbreviations used in The CORD for Early Franciscan Sources

### I. Writings of Saint Francis

Adm: Admonitions

BenLeo: Blessing for Brother Leo

CantSol: Canticle of Brother Sun

EpAnt: Letter to St. Anthony

EpCler: Letter to Clerics<sup>1</sup>

EpCust: Letter to Superiors<sup>1</sup>

EpFid: Letter to All the Faithful<sup>1</sup>

EpLeo: Letter to Brother Leo

EpMin: Letter to a Minister

EpOrd: Letter to the Entire Order

EpRect: Letter to the Rulers of People

ExhLD: Exhortation to the Praise of God

ExpPat: Exposition on the Our Father

FormViv: Form of Life for St. Clare

Fragm: Another Fragment, Rule of 1221

LaudDei: Praises of the Most High God

LaudHor: Praises at All the Hours

OffPass: Office of the Passion

OrCruc: Prayer before the Crucifix

RegB: Rule of 1223

RegNB: Rule of 1221

RegEr: Rule for Hermits

SalBMV: Salutation to our Lady

SalVirt: Salutation to the Virtues

Test: Testament of St. Francis

UltVol: Last Will Written for Clare

VPLaet: Treatise on True and Perfect Joy

<sup>1</sup>I, II refer to First and Second Editions.

### II. Other Early Franciscan Sources

1Cel: Celano, First Life of Francis

2Cel: Celano, Second Life of Francis

3Cel: Celano, Treatise on Miracles

CL: Legend of Saint Clare

CP: Process of Saint Clare

Fior: Little Flowers of St. Francis

LM: Bonaventure, Major Life of Francis

LMin: Bonaventure, Minor Life of Francis

LP: Legend of Perugia

L3S: Legend of the Three Companions

SC: Sacrum Commernicium

SP: Mirror of Perfection

Omnibus: Marion A. Habig, ed., *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*. English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973).

AB: Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M.Cap., and Ignatius Brady, O.F.M., ed., *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982).

## Poverty... as a Positive Attitude

SR. FRANCES ANN THOM, O.S.F.

Cold feet and stone floors

bare stone walls... stone steps

sleeping on hard vines... no central heating

few blankets... hard wooden kneelers and benches

long hours of prayer... sparse food... silence

long working hours... regulated schedule...

These are a few of the aspects of monastic living in the time of St. Clare and her sisters at San Damiano and, indeed, chosen by them as fundamental to a life of holiness in the 13th century. There does not seem to be any possibility that anyone could live such a life without a very POSITIVE ATTITUDE TOWARD POVERTY.

We know, of course, that Clare learned about poverty from a great teacher, Francis himself. We also know that poverty was not an abstract notion to Francis since he often referred to poverty as Lady Poverty. His first recorded love tryst was with the lady whom he called poverty and he further extolled her as:

Holy Poverty (who) destroys

the desire of riches

and avarice

and the cares of this world. (Sal Vir 11)

Clare needed to have more of an attitude of poverty than Francis because of her limited exposure to the world. Francis lived among the people and saw the problems wrought by over attachment to things while Clare had little need for things. That does not mean, however, that she could not have become overly attached to the little she did have.

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For Clare and her sisters the ideal of poverty was more personal. People did not see their poverty as they did the friars; people saw only the large building in which they knew nuns were enclosed who professed to live a life of poverty. Some few came to visit the sisters and experienced the coldness and the starkness of the building, but, for the most part there was no ostensible sign of the depth of their poverty. Eventually the reputation of the Poor Ladies would spread, but in the beginning each sister had to be convinced of her own attitude of poverty.

One of the ways in which the sisters schooled themselves in poverty was by studying the Master on the cross and tracing his life from his poor birth to his destitute death and burial. He showed them that God cares for his own if his own depend upon him. He taught them that God would always send benefactors when they were in need and if a benefactor was not to be found, he would even perform a miracle for them. But, one thing they knew, he would never let them down.

Each day was a following of the crucified...

each day the lesson of the cross became more clear...

they understood the value of detachment from things...

they tried to imitate Christ in his self-emptying...

They emulated the task of self-giving...

they shook off all the encumbrances which they could even to the extent of professing not just poverty, but highest poverty; not just being poor, but refusing to accept things which were not needed for their way of life.

Poverty enveloped every aspect of their daily lives...

saying a kind word when one wished to be critical...

complimenting another instead of keeping silence...

It was by going out of one's way to show concern for others that self-giving and self-emptying could be accomplished in one's soul and the Poor Ladies learned that together as they daily rubbed shoulders with each other. This was more important than material poverty because it was soul building!

Poverty in material fact and poverty in spirit grew together at San Damiano; one complemented the other to create the whole and holy atmosphere of highest poverty.

Obviously, most of the people of that century felt it was enough that a woman enclose herself away from her family and vow herself to live a life based on prayer and alms. Even the hierarchy of the Church could not fully relate to the poverty which Francis and Clare professed; after all, it was not practical.

Francis and his friars walked among the people...

No money in hand... no shoes on their feet... no place to stay...

the world was their cloister... Heaven their goal...

poverty and charity was the aim of the soul...

Francis had admonished his brothers not to accept money except in the case of a sick brother who needed medicine. His stand on money was so strong that he felt contaminated even to touch it. Francis saw how money had replaced God in the lives of so many and he and his brothers were to be seen, were to live as a countersign to wealth and the evil it had generated among the upper classes.

Clare and her sisters wished to emulate what Francis and the brothers were doing by wearing coarse clothing, having very little, standing as a countersign of wealth; however, they could not walk among the faithful nor aid in caring for the lepers. No one saw their poverty; most people did not understand their enclosure; often it seemed to the worldly-wise a real waste of lives; some even thought the women enclosed were too lazy to work because they thought they prayed all day long and that they were waited on... and... this was true in some of the monasteries that nuns who prayed were waited on by others who were of a lower class and were the workers in the monastery. In the monastery of San Damiano, all were equal. All of the Sisters worked; all of the Sisters prayed; all of the Sisters recreated together; all were one in the Franciscan Family of San Damiano. A revolutionary ideal!

No one suffered hunger... no one suffered from the cold...

no one needed to be lonely... poverty had brought them together...

poverty would care for them... as they cared for each other...

It is strange how the attitude of being poor could make a group so rich! The attitude to use this world's goods only when necessary and as much as one actually needed left time for other things to be done. Poverty heightened the feeling of gratitude when something was given or done by another; poverty released the mind of clutter and worry about acquiring, hoarding, gathering or keeping up with one's neighbor. Poverty left more time for prayer and charity.

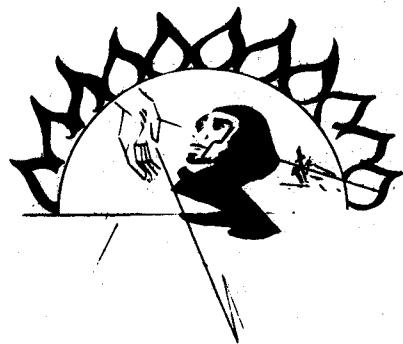
Poverty freed not only the body for good works but also the soul from harsh attitudes. By working together to remain free of useless things as a community the sisters were able to learn some very deep things about each other and from this learning came first a tolerance, then an acceptance and then a deep love. The joy which radiates from this deep love does not only affect those in the monastery but travels, as it were, through the walls into the streets of the city so that an unusual peace is found by all who visit there. Only the inhabitants of the monastery are unaware of this profound aspect in their lives. This is true of most persons who do good deeds for love — a total unawareness of its effect on others.

As silent sentinels of joy and peace...  
they live enclosed yet open to the world...  
unaware of their precious gifts... they love in spaces that seem closed...  
while, indeed, they are more uncontained than they shall ever know.

If we could only understand the attitude which pervaded San Damiano at the time of the early Damianites we would not get so wrapped up in non-essentials which we consider to be poverty: we would not try to categorize poverty by counting items or the lack of them but by attitude. Poverty is not the type of food that we buy nor the way in which it is prepared since everything should be prepared with care and love. Let us recall the scene where a sister told Clare that there was not enough bread for the sisters to eat and yet Clare has asked her to cut the loaf in half and give half to the friars. Clare's reply is certainly very positive and the result of cutting the half loaf into slices was even more positive... all had more than enough to eat!

Money was not a problem for Clare and her sisters... to Francis it meant evil to Clare it meant aid for someone in need... even from a cloister...  
if a sister's family was having a difficult time...  
money went to ease their need...

Clare did not get hung up on non-essentials... if a sister was cold, she would give her something to keep her warm. If a sister was hungry, she would get her something to eat. If a sister needed to be comforted or advised, Clare was there to help. All of this is poverty at its highest; poverty as a positive way of thinking; a positive way of looking at others and at one's self. This attitude can be cultivated, nourished and come alive through the instruction of the Holy Spirit and the Damianites were espoused to the Holy Spirit as Francis himself declared.



## The Secret of the Golden Flower

Chiara,  
a play of light  
golden as the  
rising sun  
over Assisi,  
played out  
over fifty years  
of agonizing sickness  
after sickness  
and vicious onslaughts  
of the evil one.  
She taught her  
dearly loved sisters,  
in O; a thousand ways,  
the adoration and praises  
of the Most High,  
the passionate cultivation  
of the enclosed garden...  
Jesus,  
and a swift attention  
to the tremulous  
stirring  
of the Spirit's wings.  
Once while listening  
to a sermon  
of Brother Philip,  
she was seen  
clear and bright  
as day,  
holding the Holy Child —  
enfolded in the  
secret of the golden flower.

*William Hart McNichols, S.J., S.F.O.*

## Clare of Assisi: A Light to the World

VIOLET GRENNAN, O.S.F.

In the last decade of twelfth century Italy, a girl was born into one of Assisi's noble families. Sources tell us that a few days prior to the birth in 1193, the infant's mother Ortolana, a strong and pious woman, made her way to the local church. While praying to the Crucified, she heard a voice saying to her "Do not be afraid, woman, for you will give birth in safety to a light which will give light more clearly than light itself" (*Leg Cl #2*).<sup>1</sup> Because of this prophecy, a standard pre-birth feature in saints' lives, on the day the baby was baptized in the church of San Rufino, surrounded by noble guests richly clad, she was given the name *Chiara*, or as we know it in English, *Clare*.<sup>2</sup>

### Clare's Youth: Family and Church

Clare, the oldest of three daughters born to Favorone and Ortolana, grew up in one of Assisi's noble families who belonged to the well-known and wealthy Offreduccio clan (*Leg Cl #1*). Little is known of the early stages of the lives of Clare's sisters, Catherine and Beatrice. Catherine, Clare's favorite sister and long-time confidante in everything, joined Clare just a few days after her arrival at Sant' Angelo di Panzo.<sup>3</sup> Beatrice, the third and youngest daughter of Clare's family entered the monastery of San Damiano in 1229 and is the twelfth witness in the *Process of Canonization* (*Proc 12:1*).

And what of Clare? The accounts of several of the witnesses in the

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*Process of Canonization*, who knew Clare prior to her entry into religious life, enable one to get some sense of her. According to those witnesses,

Clare was considered by all those who knew her to be a person of great honesty of very good life... intent upon and occupied with works of piety. All the citizens held her in great veneration because of her good manner of life... her kindness and humility (*Proc 2:2, 3:2, 4:2*). In the house of her father she was considered by everyone to be upright and holy (*Proc 13:2*) and kind and gracious (*Proc 16:2*). Clare fasted, prayed, willingly gave as many alms as she could (*Proc 18:3*) and wore a rough garment under her clothes (*Proc 20:4*). Her household was one of the largest in the city and great sums were spent there; she, nevertheless, saved the food they were given to eat, put it aside and then sent it to the poor whom she loved very much (*Proc 20:3*).

This portrait of the young girl Clare sheds a good deal of light on the Clare who will emerge as woman and on her life and mission in the Church.

The years of Clare's childhood and adolescence were years of great feuding in Assisi between the merchant and noble classes of the city. The merchants were determined to form a commune — an idea that was disliked intensely by the nobility of Assisi. The formation of a commune would challenge the power, wealth and prestige of the nobles in the political, economic and social arena. The merchants in pressuring the nobles to hand over some of their wealth and privileges were not motivated by concern for the poor, but to increase their own wealth. In the midst of this struggle between the nobility and merchant class Clare grew up. It was inevitable that she would witness the daily feuding and hear the conversations of the people of the commune regarding the place of money and wealth as a means of attaining status and power.<sup>4</sup>

The Church at this time was preoccupied with its own struggles. In the twelfth and at the beginning of the thirteenth centuries, many groups within the Religious Poverty Movement were choosing to live in a manner similar to that of the primitive Church. Women and men were eager to live like Christ-who-was-poor and like the apostles who were poor and lived by the work of their hands. Many of these groups while pursuing this manner of life experienced conflict with and opposition from the Church.

A short passage from a letter of Jacques d'Vitry, bishop and cardinal, a friend of the Friars Minor, the Beguines and many other women's groups who wrote the following to a friend:

When I remained for a while at the [papal] curia, I observed many displeasing things. One was so occupied with temporal and worldly things, with kings and kingdoms, with court cases and plaintiffs that it was almost impossible to discuss spiritual things even superficially.

These words were written at Genoa in 1216 and give some indication how much worldliness and care for external affairs had spread into the highest circles of the Church. Eagerness to possess and anxiousness for the things of this world, hunger for money and profit, threatened to suffocate religious values in the life of the people or at least to put them out of sight on a sidetrack.<sup>5</sup> Undoubtedly this religious, social, and economic climate impacted Clare's choice of life and her mission in the Church.

### Clare's Choice: Conversion

The one who, as God's mediator, would be the single most influential person in the evolution and crystallization of Clare's vocation, her form of life and her mission in the Church was Francis of Assisi.

In 1206, their lives begin to converge. The incident which highlights the point of convergence was recalled many years later by Clare in her Testament.

Almost immediately after his conversion, when he had neither brothers nor companions, while he was building the church of San Damiano, where he was totally visited by divine consolation and impelled to abandon completely the world, through the great joy and enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, the holy man made a prophecy about us that the Lord later fulfilled.

For at the time, climbing the wall of that church, he shouted in French to some poor people who were standing nearby: "Come help me in the work of building the monastery of San Damiano, because ladies will again dwell here who will glorify our heavenly Father (cf. Mt. 5:16) throughout this holy, universal church by their celebrated and holy manner of life." (Test C #9-14).

Some two years later (1208) when Clare was fourteen, Francis on hearing the Gospel of Matthew preached during the mass (Mt. 10:8-9) renounced all his worldly goods before Bishop Guido of Assisi, began the life of a penitent and itinerant preacher and was joined by his first companions. One year later Francis wrote his very brief *forma vitae* (1209) and set out for Rome with his eleven companions with the intention of obtaining approval for his Rule from Innocent III.

Francis on meeting with Innocent promised him obedience (not an insignificant factor in light of Rome's heightened awareness and suspicion of wandering preachers and heretical women and men in this period) and received oral approval of his *forma vitae* from the pope.

This recognition of Francis by Innocent III had very wide implications for Clare. The pope's oral approval to Francis was no justification for the formation of a female order. However, it is acknowledged that Innocent grasped the significance of the feminine piety movement of the early

thirteenth century and was in favor of adding women's orders to the church to strengthen it in its struggle with its heresy and current political difficulties.<sup>6</sup>

With Innocent's approval, Francis and his companions freely and joyfully moved through cities, towns and villages preaching conversion and penance. Clare would surely have heard and possibly met him. Several references are made to Francis' preaching as an instrumental factor in Clare's conversion to a more radical way of living the gospel (*Proc* 6:1; 12:2; 17:3,4; 20:6). His new approach to Gospel living, his words and example and willingness to endure all for the sake of the Gospel set Clare's heart afire.<sup>7</sup>

In the course of several meetings with Francis which continued for almost a year and to which Clare "went secretly so as not to be seen by her parents" (*Proc* 17:2), Clare's vocation was being crystallized. It was becoming increasingly more clear to her that she desired and God was calling her through Francis, to a more radical life than that of the lay penitent which she was already living. Francis' preaching on the poverty and humility of Jesus Incarnate and Christ Crucified filled Clare's heart with an intense desire to follow in the footprints of the Lord Jesus.

It was on Palm Sunday, 19 March 1212, that Clare was clothed in the habit of poverty by Francis at the Portiuncula. Immediately after Francis, Clare and a faithful friend left for the Benedictine monastery of San Paolo delle Ancelle di Dio. It was during Clare's very brief sojourn at this monastery that her extended family, seething with anger, attempted in a forceful way to take her away. Clare, we are told, sought refuge in the chapel, tore the cloth off the altar and made a shield of it against her persecutors. Clare was evidently claiming the right of sanctuary, and her family, knowing the implications of touching her, withdrew.<sup>7</sup>

The intense reaction of Clare's family must be understood against the medieval concept of honor in which criticism or infamy brought on by the deeds of any one member of a family or clan was held to be equally shared by all. What women did was held to be an especial threat to family honor. It was for that reason that families maintained guardianship over female members so long as they remained at home and saw to their proper marriage or placement for the double considerations of providing for their material support and guaranteeing the honor of the house.<sup>9</sup>

After this incident, Francis found refuge for Clare at Sant' Angelo di Panzo on the slopes of Mt. Subasio which until recently was also considered to have been a Benedictine monastery. However, the findings of a recent study indicate Sant' Angelo was a place of "recluses" or "penitents" that would have been closer to the Beguine expression of women religious rather than the Benedictine or Cistercian expressions.<sup>10</sup> Clare after her monastic experience possibly wished to experience a different form of

religious life — that of the reclusive or eremetical type. Further reference will be made to this style of life in a later section.

### Clare's Form of Life: Gospel

Clare finally arrived at San Damiano where she would by "vocation and choice" ( *Test C #16*) live the next forty years of her life in the "poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ and of his most holy Mother." This was to be her life and mission and she would struggle for almost her entire life with the Roman Curia (while remaining obedient and faithful to the church) to live it out.

At the beginning of her life at San Damiano, Clare and a few other ladies received from Francis a brief *forma vitae* which consisted mainly of Gospel texts. No copy of this rule is extant; however, fragments of it were preserved by Clare in her Rule (Ch. VI, 2) and she refers to it in her Testament.

In the Testament, she states "When the blessed Francis saw, however, that although we were physically weak and frail, we did not shirk deprivation, poverty, hard works, trial or the shame or contempt of the world... he rejoiced greatly.... Afterwards he wrote a form of life for us, especially that we always persevere in holy poverty." (*Test C #27, 28, 33.*) It was intended only for San Damiano, for Francis had bound himself to care for only Clare and her companions. Clare tells us: "and moved by compassion for us, he bound himself, both through himself and through his Order, to always have the same loving care and special solicitude for us as for his own brothers." (*Test C #29.*)

This form of life held for Clare the essential points of her vocation: life according to the Holy Gospel, absolute poverty after the example of Francis and the closest possible connection with the Friars Minor.<sup>11</sup> Clare clung to this. It profoundly influenced her entire life and was the foundation and mainstay of her mission in the Church.

In order to take a closer look at Clare's understanding of that mission — which I believe Clare never actually articulated, but it evolved as she lived her life fully and intensely — the central place poverty had in Clare's life must be highlighted. Her Testament provides us with a lens through which to understand her poverty and mission.

Clare's Testament has been referred to as the document of greatest auto-biographical importance, one of the truest reflections of the soul of Clare, richest in personal and franciscan memories and in revealing the charism of the Poor Clares. The Testament mirrors her radical choice of loving the poor and humble Christ and her manner of conceiving the fraternity of the Poor Sisters in vibrant fidelity to the Church.<sup>12</sup>

In verses eighteen through twenty-three of her Testament, Clare brings

into high relief her understanding of her mission, and that of the Poor Ladies, in the Church. Acknowledging that she has been called and has freely chosen to respond (*Test C #16*), Clare states

With what eagerness and fervor of mind and body, therefore, must we keep the Commandments of our God and Father, so that with the help of the Lord, we may return to Him an increase of His talent. For the Lord Himself has placed us not only as a form for others in being an *example and mirror*, but even for our sisters whom the Lord has called to our way of life as well, that they in turn might be a mirror and example to those living in the world. (*Test C #18-20.*)

Here Clare describes her life and mission and that of the Poor Ladies — a community of women, who by their very way of life, will bring glory to God in the Church. She then spells out how that mission devolves on the Order. Life as it is lived in fraternal union and mutual service is to be an example, a mirror in the Church to those in their own monastery and to those in the Church outside the community. For Clare everything comes from the way of being — a way of being that is the result of being filled with Christ and the Spirit of God — and thereby becoming a living sign, a light for the world. The very form of Clare's life and that of the Poor Ladies constitutes their mission.<sup>13</sup>

The particular shape and form of this mission was powerfully influenced by Clare's choice of a life lived in absolute poverty. In verses thirty-three through fifty-five of her Testament (the most decisive and clear section affirming the pivot of the Order: the poverty and humility of the Son of God, the humble Gospel life taught to the Poor Ladies by Francis), Clare highlights the fact that she sees her mission in the church profoundly connected with a life of absolute poverty. Her mission, and that of the Poor Ladies, is to live in poverty like the "Son of God who was placed poor in the crib, lived poor in the world and remained naked on the cross." (*Test C #16.*)

### Clare's Privilege: Poverty

Over and over again, Clare refers in this section to the central place poverty had in the life of Francis, in her life and in the life of the Poor Ladies. Francis, in the very earliest days of the Order of San Damiano, "wrote a form of life for us, especially that we always persevere in holy poverty (*Test C #33*) and he encouraged us with many words and examples... and many writings (*#34*) and having imitated the footprints of the Son of God never departed from this holy poverty (*#36*)."

Clare goes on to state that

time and again we willingly bound ourselves to our Lady most holy Poverty that after my death, the sisters... would never turn away from her (*#39*).

And as I have always been most zealous and solicitous to observe and to have others observe the holy poverty that we have promised to the Lord and our holy father Francis (#41) so, too, the others who will succeed me in office should be always bound to observe holy poverty (#42). Moreover, for greater security, I took care to have our profession of the most holy poverty that we promised our father strengthened with privileges by the Lord Pope Innocent... and by his successors (#43) that we never nor in any way turn away from her.

In these and subsequent verses, Clare clearly and unequivocally states it is her desire that she, those with her and those to come after her live in poverty like the son of God and in the footprints of Francis. This is her mission, and in order to secure the carrying out of that mission by those who would come after her, Clare struggled her entire life with the Roman curia to live a life of absolute poverty without any possessions or fixed income.

It is in this section of her Testament that Clare records her request for and concession of the Privilege of Poverty by Innocent III and his successors. Here, too, she underscores the fact how after the death of Francis she stood alone in sustaining the value of absolute poverty (*Test C* #37-39).

In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council (in response to the extraordinary flowering of religious movements and groups and the need to exert some control) legislated that new religious groups were to adopt the rule of an already existing and approved order. Since a new rule was not permitted, Clare, wishing to safeguard the life according to the example of Francis and according to the *forma vitae* written by him, asked Innocent III for the permission for the community to live without possessions.<sup>14</sup> Spelled out, Clare wanted the Poor Ladies to maintain their renunciation of property and profession of strict poverty. This was a very special privilege made once and for all and never before or after requested from the Roman Curia. Since there was no precedent for such a case, the Pope had to compose his own handwritten draft for the special and exceptional right.<sup>15</sup>

Innocent, in responding to Clare highlighted in his document the renunciation of all possessions on the part of Clare and the Poor Ladies from the point of view of imitation of Christ. He included passages in his text from Clare's letter requesting the Privilege.

As is evident you have renounced the desire for all temporal things, desiring to dedicate yourselves to the Lord alone.... Since you have sold all things and given them to the poor, you propose not to have any possessions whatsoever, clinging in all things to the footprints of Him... who for our sake was made poor.... therefore we confirm... your proposal of most high poverty, granting you by the authority of this letter that no one compel you to receive possessions. (*Proc* #5-7).

The granting of the privilege by Innocent was clearly in opposition to the decree of the Lateran Council since it made possible a new form of religious community not based on an existing order.<sup>16</sup> However, it did not end Clare's struggle with the Curia.

Cardinal Hugolino, who personally knew and cared for Clare, as papal legate in 1218 gave "all the poor ladies living in enclosure" the Rule of Benedict with an added "Constitutions." It was not a Rule just for San Damiano but for several other convents of Poor Ladies. This form of life contained legislation about the enclosure, fasting and prayer, but said nothing about possessions and the relationship with the Friars. Clare and the Poor Ladies apparently accepted this form of life, but continued to live life at San Damiano based on Francis' *forma vitae* and the privilege of poverty.<sup>17</sup>

This same man, but now as Gregory IX, on the occasion of a visit to San Damiano spoke to Clare about accepting possessions which he himself offered her. Celano recounts that the Pope literally told Clare: "If you fear for your vow, we release you from it." Clare with a clarity, confidence and directness that characterized all her choices and decisions, responded: "Holy Father, never do I wish to be released in any way from the following of Christ." (*Leg Cl* #14). What more needed to be said? Gregory IX renewed the privilege of poverty in 1228.

#### Clare's Conviction: A Dwelling Place

There was yet one final struggle Clare must go through. In 1245, Innocent IV confirmed the form of life given by Hugolino (1218). He later repealed his confirmation and gave another Rule in which possessions were permitted. The Rule of Innocent was unacceptable to Clare, especially because it disregarded the *forma vitae* and privilege of poverty granted in 1228.

Some scholars propose that it was in response to this Bull of Innocent (issued on August 6, 1247) which permitted endowment of possessions and fixed income, that Clare composed her Testament. It is generally acknowledged that the Testament was written between 1247 - 1253. The document was meant to confirm strongly the essentials of Clare's Rule, and its pillars of poverty, fraternity, of seclusion to small places like San Damiano, of dependence on the Roman Catholic Church and the Order of Friars Minor. As such it explains very well the doubt that the Rule would ever be approved by the Church.<sup>18</sup>

Clare is a strong, persistent, determined yet gentle and gracious woman, and the absolute centrality of "holy and highest poverty" in her life and mission, shines ever more brightly in light of that lifelong struggle to preserve her commitment to follow in the footprints of the Lord Jesus,



after the manner and example of Francis. Despite this struggle she, as did Francis, remained obedient and faithful to the Church.

For Clare, poverty was her way of living the gospel — an essential part of the following of Christ. For her, economic poverty, evangelical poverty and contemplation were intimately linked. Poverty was not just another virtue to be perfected or ascetical practice to be adhered to; it was, rather a form of life, an attitude of life comprising the whole person, realized in Clare by God.<sup>19</sup> Her desire was to embrace the poor Christ, to contemplate this Christ

who was poor in the crib, who lived a poor life and who hung naked on the cross (*Test C* #45), to imitate him, to follow the footprints of the Son of God who was made for us the Way... which Francis has shown us by word and example (*Test C* #2) by following the poverty and humility of His beloved son and His glorious Virgin Mother (*Test C* #46).

For both Clare and Francis, poverty and humility are inseparably linked. Humility — an acknowledgement that all good things without exception are gifts of God, a recurring theme in her Testament — is for Clare the inner attitude which should correspond with external poverty. Celano in his Legend states "Her poverty in all things was in harmony with poverty of spirit which is true humility." (*Leg Cl* #13.)

Clare's heightened awareness of God's graciousness and mercy in her life, her total dependence on God, and her contemplation of Christ in the crib and on the cross filled her sensitive and compassionate being with the desire to relive the self-emptying and crucifixion, a desire which found even greater satisfaction through her choice of the added self-denial possible in the enclosed life.

For Clare, and for the Poor Ladies who were with her and who would follow her, enclosure was the means and the way to enter ever more deeply into this self-emptying, this *kenosis* which is characteristic of the Lord and set as example by him to those who wish to be disciples. It has been suggested that it is to the recluses and penitents that Clare owes the completely new and revolutionary idea of a bond of deeper union in that *kenosis* of Christ which is his solitude of death on the cross.<sup>20</sup>

*Enclosure* through the ages has had a variety of functions and interpretations. For our purposes, it will be addressed as it impacted the life and mission of Clare. In the eleventh and twelfth century reforms, enclosure was seen as a way to remedy abuses in female monasteries of the time. Its aim was twofold: to limit severely the "wanderings" of the women and to eliminate any type of close association with the sexes. A widespread distrust of women and a fear of female sexuality on the part of clerical reformers has been proposed as a large part of the basic rationale for

enclosure. Only secondarily was it considered a physical protection from the dangers of the outside world.<sup>21</sup>

Whatever the rationale behind it, by its very definition strict cloistering insured that many women's communities could no longer be autonomous, independent bodies. With the loss of autonomy came a similar loss in public influence and general visibility for the abbess and monastery. The reformers of the eleventh and twelfth centuries wanted it applied to all female religious. It is worth noting that this legislation was always made by men who did not share the lifestyle of enclosed women and did not consult them!<sup>22</sup>

With the restrictive legislation limiting and controlling the lives of women who were religiously motivated but did not want monastic life, the lifestyles of the Beguines or Anchoresses (recluses or penitents) became increasingly more attractive and a viable option for many women in the late Middle Ages. For the purposes of this paper we will focus briefly on the anchoresses (recluses) since their way of life influenced to some degree Clare's early years in San Damiano.

Many of the women who were attracted to the anchoritic/reclusive way of life were strong, highly motivated women who refused to succumb to parents' pressure to marry, and who desired to live a life simpler and stricter than monastic life. These women were characterized by a strong commitment to their way of life (fasting prayer, solitude, aiding lepers, giving spiritual direction and prophetic advice.) Although they were in contact with bishops, abbots and monks who seem to have supported them, they were free of their authority and jurisdiction. Consequently, the recluses had a great deal of control over their own lives.<sup>23</sup>

These women, whose cells were usually by the city gates or next to one of the many town churches, by their very way of living witnessed to their faith. The vocation of the recluse or anchoress was held in very high esteem — no significant fact in light of the general lack of appreciation of women's vocations in that period.<sup>24</sup>

In one of the more recent studies on the place of enclosure in the life of the Poor Clares, it is proposed that Clare probably owes her style of life in perpetual enclosure to these recluses or penitents who were "incarcerate" — confined to one place. In fact, the name by which the Order of the Poor Sisters of St. Clare was known to the townspeople of Assisi "*Order of Enclosed Women*" is related to the manner of living of those recluses.<sup>25</sup>

Contrary to the widely held opinion that enclosure was imposed on Clare, it seems plausible, in light of more recent research, to propose that neither Francis, Cardinal Hugolino or anyone else, imposed enclosure on Clare, but that she herself consciously and freely chose it. Since in all other instances she pursued with such vigor and determination what she

saw as necessary to safeguard her form of life, it would be inconsistent for Clare to accept enclosure if it was not to advance her life and mission in the church.

Chiara Lainati in her most recent writings on enclosure points out that there has been a fundamental misunderstanding in the Order about enclosure in terms of seeing it mainly as favoring a life of contemplation and as a protection for chastity. Her understanding of enclosure in the life of the Poor Clare is that it is one ulterior deepening of the "emptying out" of a woman who, in addition to embracing the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, ties herself to a place where she is limited in possibilities.

In addition to the vows, enclosure is embraced as a particular way of entering more intensely and deeply into the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ. A vowed life in enclosure is the Poor Clare's particular way in the Church of living out the paschal mystery of taking upon herself the emptying out of Christ on the cross.<sup>26</sup> This was Clare's life. From this perspective, enclosure has value in itself and provides a much clearer understanding and appreciation of the fact that Clare not only freely embraced enclosure, but valued it as an integral dimension of her life and mission in the Church.

### Clare: A Light in the Church

How did the Church view this woman who gave birth to a new form of life within the Church and whose very life was her mission? The following excerpts from the *Bull of Canonization* afford us to glimpse of how the Church perceived and experienced Clare:

In this Clare,  
a clear mirror of example has been given to this world.

While this light remained certainly in a hidden enclosure,  
it emitted sparkling rays outside.

Placed in the confined area of the monastery,  
yet it was spread throughout the whole world.

Hidden within,  
she extended herself abroad (BC #3-4).

This woman was undoubtedly an eminent and most celebrated tree with far reaching branches that brought forth the sweet fruit of a religious way of life in the field of the Church.... This woman furnished a new fountain of living water... planted and cultivated a vineyard of poverty and set up a garden of humility in the domain of the Church bound by immense needs (BC #9).

Her very life was an instruction and lesson of others (BC #10). Therefore,

it is fitting that the universal Church venerate this woman through her teaching (BC #20).

In the foregoing excerpts from the *Bull of Canonization*, the Church acknowledges over and over again that Clare is truly a light to the world. In the mid-thirteenth century, that light shone brightly; the passage of time has dimmed that brilliance somewhat.

A dearth of good critical material on Clare has been a significant factor in that dimming. Until very recently much of the material on Clare was presented as part of Francis' biographies, written from a male perspective and varying from biography to biography. For too long Clare has stood in Francis' shadow.

With Clare's own writings now accessible to the English speaking world, Clare as a person in her own right and as a woman becomes more accessible to us. We can begin to look at Clare from a woman's perspective and ask who is this woman Clare and what does her life and mission say to us today. Clare's Rule, Testament and Letters indicate, among other things, that she was a strong, persistent, determined, holy, loving and skillful woman who had a vision. She articulated that vision in her life and writings; she spent herself tirelessly in pursuit of it; she never saw it validated in her own lifetime, but left that vision to countless women who would desire and attempt to follow in her footprints. The passion that characterized her living and loving spans centuries and cultures and challenges us to live as passionately our "vocation and choice" in our world and time. □

### End notes

<sup>1</sup>References to the Legends, Process, and Writings of Clare are taken from R. J. Armstrong, *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*. New York: Paulist Press, 1988.

<sup>2</sup>L. Iriarte, *Franciscan History: The Three Orders of St. Francis of Assisi*. Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983, p. 332.

<sup>3</sup>A. Fortini, *Francis of Assisi*, tr. Helen Moak. New York: Crossroads Publishing Cop., 1981, pp. 347-348.

<sup>4</sup>M. Karecki, "Clare: Poverty and Contemplation in her Life and Writings," in *Peace Weavers: Medieval Religious Women II*. Cistercian Studies Series 72, Cistercian Publication, Inc., 1987, p. 168.

<sup>5</sup>See E. Grau, "As a Virgin Embrace the Poor Christ: St. Clare's Life in Poverty and Humility," pp. 20-21.

<sup>6</sup>See Brenda Bolton, "Mulieres Sanctae," in *Women in Medieval Society*. London: Basil Blackwell, 1973, p. 148.

<sup>7</sup>Karecki, p. 169.

<sup>8</sup>Fortini, p. 344.

<sup>9</sup>Fortini, p. 345.

<sup>10</sup>See Armstrong, footnote 82, p. 164.

- <sup>11</sup>E. Grau, "The Rule of St. Clare (1253) in Its Dependence on the Rule of the Friars Minor (1223)," tr. by D. Temple, OFM, in *Franziskanische Studien*, 1953, pp. 211 ff.
- <sup>12</sup>Chiara A. Lainati, "Testament of St. Clare," tr. from the Italian by J. Frances, P.C.C. (Roswell, NM), in *Dizionario Franceseano*. Padua, 1983, p. 7.
- <sup>13</sup>H. Roggen, *The Spirit of St. Clare*, tr. P. J. Oligny. Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1971, pp. 39-43.
- <sup>14</sup>P. Van Leeuwen, "Clare's Rule," *Greyfriars Review* I, September 1987, p. 66.
- <sup>15</sup>Grau, " 'As a Virgin,' " p. 24.
- <sup>16</sup>Bolton, p. 149.
- <sup>17</sup>Van Leeuwen, pp. 67-68.
- <sup>18</sup>Lainati, p. 4.
- <sup>19</sup>Roggen, pp. 16-18.
- <sup>20</sup>Chiara A. Lainati, "Enclosure: Characteristic Way for Clare to Express the Paschal Mystery" from the Italian "La Clausura: non mezzo di contemplazione, ma modo tipico delle Clarisse di esprimere il mistero pasquale," in *Forma Sororum*, # 4 & 5 (1983). P. 2 in redacted form of translation.
- <sup>21</sup>J. T. Schulenberg, "Strict Active Enclosure and its Effects on the Female Monastic Experience (540-1100)," *Distant Echoes: Medieval Religious Women I*, Cistercian Studies Series 71. Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1984, p. 79.
- <sup>22</sup>Schulenberg, p. 59.
- <sup>23</sup>P. J. Rosof, "The anchoress in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries," *Peace Weavers*. Pp. 125, 140.
- <sup>24</sup>Rosof, p. 140.
- <sup>25</sup>Lainati, "Enclosure," p. 2.
- <sup>26</sup>"Enclosure," p. 1 of redacted typescript.



# "Go forth swiftly"

SR. MARIE BEHA, O.S.C.

As religious life stands on the threshold of the 1990's, the progress of renewal continues, charting a direction for the last decade of this century and influencing the next. Will it be a springtime flush with the hope of new growth or an autumn going into winter of accelerated aging and decline? The answers are being determined "today" in the intersecting of past history, present events, and personal/communal decisions. Beyond that, the future lies uncertain, yet filled with possibility. One hope for that future is being spelled out in a renewed spirituality of religious life. During the '80's this renewal focused primarily on apostolate and community as integral and essential elements of all religious life. What may lie ahead is increased emphasis on the vows, as summary expressions of religious consecration.

But are they that? Do the "vows I have made" (Ps. 116) really summarize the thrust of my life's orientation toward God motivating me to fuller, deeper consecration? This basic question must be faced, not in theory, but in practical experience; it must be asked of each vow and of all the vows in their interrelatedness.

As a small but, hopefully, meaningful contribution, the present reflection focuses on the spirituality of a vow of enclosure and how it relates to that living in Christ which is basic to all Christian baptismal consecration and to the other vows which shape and form religious life.<sup>1</sup>

In a society where increasing mobility is fact of everyday experience, as well as cultural ideal, living an enclosed life has to be problematic. For some, enclosure recedes into the realm of mystery, where it can be respected in the safety of the abstract and left in the practical limbo of ignorance. For others, it becomes a problem, often dismissed as symptomatic of some religious aberration. In either case, most Americans

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continue to live out the cultural values of upward mobility and freedom of choice that keep us a nation on the move.

Enclosure, by contrast, not only accepts limits, but freely chooses, makes a commitment, to some very definite boundaries. These limits are geographic, requiring that persons live within a certain, restricted space, committed to a community of others who have accepted similar restrictions. That is the negative and more easily stated side of enclosure. The positive aspects are an environment of prayer-filled solitude and silence, a concentration of purpose, that living within clearly defined limits makes possible. Then holy enclosure becomes a powerful beam of light focused out; it is for others.

Even this brief statement of meaning already indicates some of the ways in which enclosure is related to the other vows. All are counter-cultural. All are evangelical, based on the good news of the life of Jesus. None are absolutes; they are only means, moving toward ends. They are relative values needing to be weighed in the balance against the prior rights of human persons and the absolute value of love. Each vow incarnates a spirituality, expressing externally an orientation of the spirit. The materiality of the vow is as variegated as the persons who practice it; its expression changes and should change as often as necessary to better express the language of the heart. It is the latter that provides direction and a steadfast core-commitment against which the variables of lived expression can be critiqued.

### The Enclosed Life of Jesus

Like the other evangelical counsels, enclosure is rooted in the way Jesus lived; in this case, in His apartness and His being a part. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God" and "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn. 1:1, 14) hint at both themes: the Son's eternal oneness with the Father and His being sent into our world. Jesus' descent into this world continued His nearness "to the Father's heart"; it was for the sake of "making Him known." (Jn. 1:18).

At the very beginning of the Good News, we are already in touch with the mystery that underlies enclosure. When the appointed time had come for the fleshment of the Word in our world, Jesus entered into our way of living. He was enclosed in the womb of the Virgin Mary, sheltered in the confines of a simple family; he accepted the cultural limitations of village life in one corner of the narrow world of Jewish culture and Old Testament religious tradition. Jesus descended. And the life of God-with-us continues that movement. Being enclosed as one of us offered Him

no security; nor was it easy escape. The intimacy of family life in Nazareth was preparatory to being sent forth.

Through the brief years of public ministry, Jesus lived out an alternating rhythm of going apart for periods of prolonged prayer and being involved with equal intensity in caring for the needs of others. Love of God and love of neighbor were not two loves, pulling in opposite directions but one fire of charity that simply had to be expressed in every way possible. In the continuing ministry of Jesus, both expressions expanded. His sense of mission grew. He came to appreciate that He was being sent not only to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt. 10:6) but also to rival religious neighbors like the Samaritans and even to those pagans who were "great of faith" (Lk. 7:9). At the same time that Jesus' preaching became, in one sense, more inclusive, in another way, it grew more concentrated, as it deepened. So in the last months of His life, most of His preaching was directed toward His close friends and disciples. Finally, on the night before He suffered He revealed the secrets of His Heart to the twelve, sharing a last supper with them.

At the same time that the being-sent of Jesus' mission was developing in this pattern of growing inclusivity and being limited to depth-sharing with a few, His prayer before the Father (if we may dare to speak of such an awesome mystery) seems to show a comparable development. From the solitude of the forty desert days at the beginning, to the long nights spent in solitary prayer, from the request of the disciples, "Lord teach us how to pray," (Lk. 11:1) to the shared intimacy of the final moments of the last supper where Jesus prayed that "they may be one, as you Father in me and I in you, that they may be one in us" (Jn. 17:21), the prayer of Jesus both reached out in growing inclusiveness and also invited others into the singular mystery of who He was before the Father.

This same rhythm is evidenced in the final crisis events of Jesus' death/resurrection. His last word, His ultimate activity, would be one of singular surrender, "Father into your hands..." (Lk 22:46), as He returned His spirit to the God who had sent Him into the world. Resurrection would be the Father's answer as Jesus was caught up into the life of glory. No longer confined by space or time, he would live in eternal presence to the Father. This Ascension would make possible a sending forth of the Spirit now at work transforming our world, making it possible for all of us to live the good news.

### Enclosure as Gospel Imperative

Living according to the holy gospel is the challenge and the opportunity of all the baptized. What Jesus began is to continue in us. Each Christian is called to a going into the world as well as a degree of separateness from

it. Each is invited to grow into a greater inclusivity that is paralleled by comparable development of personal indepth relationships with God and with others. Overflowing love for others needs to be rooted in silence and solitude, if the word spoken is to be a living word. Closeness requires distance, a distance that charity transforms into presence.

Jesus' way of living becomes the rhythm of Christian life. Some measure of apartness balanced by some form of presence is gospel imperative, a necessary element in each Christian life. Enclosure is not just esoteric preference; it is essential ingredient. Like the other vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, it is an evangelical counsel which, on closer examination, proves to be commandment.

Why call any of the vows counsels? Perhaps to indicate that the way in which canonical religious life spells out their meaning is just one option, a choice offered to individual discernment. In this sense, marriage and life in family are equally gospel counsels; no one is commanded to marry or to have children; this is just one response to the universal call to holiness.

No one is commanded to live out enclosure according to the specifics of religious life, much less those of monastic community. All Christians need to find ways to grow in a spirituality of going apart and of being part. For example, marriage is for children but it is also for the sharing of intimacy between man and wife. Religious life is for the Kingdom but this being sent forth is response to a call that is first heard in the silence and solitude of the heart.

### Vowing Enclosure

Since the spirituality that lies behind enclosure is integral to the vocation of all Christians, why do some observe it by special vow? For the same reason that some in the Body of Christ profess other vows, whether these be marriage vows or those of poverty, chastity and obedience, or other specific promises, for example, to care for the needy. All of these commitments express response to a special charismatic call; they are gifts given to individuals for the sake of others. They are bold-face statements, written in the lives of certain persons, words that shout values which every Christian must en flesh in some form.

It is the value behind the vow that is truly Catholic, an absolute for all. The specifics of vowed expression are only means and so relative. A vow of poverty is not an attempt to live without any property at all, nor does it impose the restrictions of a vowed religious on other Christians. It does not even say that these particular expressions of poverty are always better even for the religious who has accepted them by vow. All of this is relative: to one's call in the body of Christ, to the particular situation in which individuals find themselves. Similarly, that "unmarriageable for

the sake of the Kingdom" (P. van Breemen, *CALLED BY NAME*, Dimension Book, Denville, N.J., 1976) which describes the vow of religious chastity, does not make it an ideal imposed absolutely on all or even on someone who might experience a call to it. It invites a free response, a personal response-ability relative to the amount of freedom a person already possesses. What is of absolute value, requiring an unqualified "yes", is the priority of relationship with God over every other form of intimacy. Vowed celibacy simply expresses one way of putting God first. Obedience is likewise a means, one among others, to the absolute value of surrender to the will of God mediated through others. The way that this is expressed is relative to persons and situations.

Vowing enclosure is just one way of expressing a value that is absolute. It is this central value that needs clear articulation so it can be embraced more fully, lived more freely, and can be distinguished from particular expressions which are relative and changing. Being enclosed is not "always better" even for those vowed to observe it and certain expressions of it are quite contrary to a more directly apostolic vocation. But for those invited, it can be a particular expression of that going apart for the sake of being a part which was Christ's own leaving this world and going to the Father.

Like all vows, enclosure is, first of all, a spiritual value; this is its absolute meaning. But since we are speaking of a human value, we are also describing an incarnational reality, requiring a material, physical expression. Overemphasis on one aspect or the other results in malformation. Too spiritualized, enclosure drifts into vagueness, the world of ineffective "good intentions." Emphasis on the material expression results in rigidity and a self-satisfying preoccupation with small detail. The vow comes alive when there is a healthy balance: a spirit that breathes life into the exterior forms coupled with sufficient embodiment to support the spirit and keep it humbly honest.

Because of its material aspect, enclosure needs to be incarnate in practical sorts of ways. This "spelling out" may be as informal as the customs of family life or as formal as the code of canon law. "The way we do things" is the streambed of tradition that defines expression, keeping it moving in a definite direction, giving it a certain shape and force. But the life-giving element is the meaning behind the observance; without this the streambed runs dry!

### Readiness for Vowing Enclosure

Like all other vows enclosure presupposes a certain readiness, which forms the human subsoil making growth possible; just as marriage requires some level of personal/social maturity, so too, the vows made in religious life. Poverty, for instance, presupposes that a person has sufficient security

to be able to give up possessiveness. It also requires enough life-experience to have developed appreciation of and a caring for the good things this world offers. The vow of chastity has comparable prerequisites including a capacity for intimacy and respect for marriage and family life. Obedience presupposes that someone has already worked through adolescent rebellion and come to a sense of personal autonomy, the "yes" and the "no" of individual responsibility.

Enclosure makes comparable demands on human maturity. These might be summed up as negotiating the crisis of limits and developing an "interior" life. A small child has no understanding of limits; his power is infinite; his tiny body is THE world. Disillusionment follows and then, hopefully, a growing realism. The world is not subject to self; mother says "no." The world is also larger than self; the child reaches out and others respond. With some oversimplification, the rest of life's growth can be imaged as further development of these two themes.

Facing life's limits and entering into realistic relationships delineates the development of the baby and the task of the adult. Learning to relate to siblings or other small children rounds off some of the rough edges of omnipotence, a process that is continued in school and on the playground. The need to make choices adds further realism; no one can have it all. But choosing is also freeing. The world beyond the self, the enrichment of friendship, the direction of commitment, enlarge the self. Limits, once accepted, frame the doorway to transcendence.

Vowing enclosure is simply one way of enfleshing this acceptance, this belief in the greater power that lies beyond the narrow world of self. The vow presupposes that an individual has already made some peace with the world of limits, peace, not just an uneasy truce. And has experienced that such acceptance holds the key to transcendence. It is a lesson not learned once but repeated in changing circumstances and only completed in the final "yes" of life limited by death.

Negotiating the crisis of limits makes possible the development of an interior life. When the external world is in focus, then it is no longer so preoccupying; looking inward becomes possible. Self-conscious intersection gives way to the quiet of interiority; solitude becomes an option.

Just as limits threaten independence and can bear either the sour fruit of rebellion or be transcended into the freedom of acceptance, so too, solitude can deteriorate into withdrawal and aloneness or be transformed into deepening relationship and solidarity. Before the latter can occur, individuals desiring to live an enclosed life need to have grown into a maturing sense of who they are and where they are going. Then they can experience both limits and aloneness as filled with creative possibilities. Sounds nice. But does it happen? All we are claiming here is that it can, if one is ready and willing.

Like all the other vows, enclosure is a risk. On the one hand, it probes personal choice, demanding a decision that must be made over and over again in all the changing circumstances of one's life. What is promised at the beginning of an enclosed life must be renewed in the face of later questions. The crisis of continuing fidelity must be faced with regard to enclosure as with all the other vows. To say "I will be forever faithful" can destroy freedom, leaving one chained to living out practices that are no longer life-giving. Or it can liberate by deepening personal direction and providing a context for other free choices. To make a vow is to take a risk, either that of deadening repetition of routine or of careless neglect of what has been promised. Yet refusing all commitment is even more risky.

Like all the other vows, enclosure may threaten certain human values. Poverty, for example, exposes one to the possibility of irresponsibility, of living like a child expecting to be cared for by others, or having all one's needs guaranteed, of settling for security in preference to creative response. Poverty can shrink one's world and harden one's heart into miserliness. Similarly, chastity can avoid the maturation of intimate, longterm relationships, leaving someone with the personality of an "old maid" of whatever sex! Obedience has another set of risks, allowing an individual the satisfaction of perpetual adolescence, always rebelling against the authority of others without ever having to answer for self or assume responsibility for authorizing others.

Enclosure has its own dangers and the "wise virgin" prepares to meet them throughout her vowed life. The separateness that is one side of living an enclosed life reduces one's exposure to the world outside. This makes it easier to ignore such reality as poverty's degradation, the explosiveness of violence, the many faces of evil in our world. Yet this is a risk for any "sheltered life" including that of the academic, the research scientist, or any other individual cloistered in a specialization.

The smallness of enclosure also deletes some of the finer things that the wider world offers: the richness of much natural beauty, the splendor of an art exhibit or concert, the rich resources of the best of libraries. Obviously, these are not completely lost but they are no longer as accessible. For someone who is not ready, or who finds that enclosed life, in whatever way that is spelled out, shrinks the world, the loss may be greater than the gain.

Symptomatic of unreadiness is a certain element of escapism. When the world becomes too small pressure builds. Little things are magnified. Just as with the Israelites in the desert, muttering and murmuring become chronic diseases. "This wretched food..." (Nm. 21:5) The desert, instead

of sharpening vision, produces mirages. Solitude is viewed as solitary confinement. Escape from such a punishment becomes a necessity and is accomplished with all the ingenuity of the desperate. Useless curiosity, small talk, mindless busyness and addictive behavior of many kinds substitute for reality. Anything is better than nothing.

### The World Enlarged

Such are the risks for which one must be ready. Presuming that the person vowing enclosure has come to terms with the crisis of limits and has some experience of the interior life, the question for on-going formation becomes: how to minimize the risks and maximize the richness of an enclosed life? The answer seems to lie in continuing to face limits and growing in interiority, while avoiding the dangers of escape into unreality and diminished worldview. The world of the enclosure will be as real as one's self-knowledge and as fruitful as one's sense of the kingdom.

Just as enclosure presupposes a certain amount of self-knowledge, it also demands continual growth in self-understanding, self-acceptance, self-love. This is life-long process more than accomplishment and professing the vow is only proclamation of intent, not guarantee of fulfillment.

The limits of an enclosed life bring one face-to-face with the reality of personal weakness. Anyone entering the enclosure with illusions about achieved virtue is in for rapid disillusionment. Without the distractions of absorbing work and the stimulation of the "outside" world, there is a corresponding increase in focus on self. That is alarming enough itself; who wants to live in a house of mirrors!

But the focus we are speaking of here is more than a matter of self-consciousness. Though it may have some aspects of introspection, especially at the beginning, it soon moves from attending to self, to self-awareness. The latter is intuitive, rather than judgmental; contemplative, more than rational. While attending to self is focused concentration that restricts one's range of vision, self-awareness is part of a bigger picture, heightening sensitivity to all reality. It is alert but not strained, open rather than restricted. As a consequence, it maintains perspective; self is seen in relationship. In this way, self-knowledge, even growing awareness of one's sinfulness, bears the authentic fruit of self-acceptance. Without this transformation, enclosure is condemnation to constant companionship with someone who is vaguely disagreeable.

Self-acceptance is slow-growth virtue; perhaps this is why discerning capacity for living an enclosed life requires time. Persons may have to move through some initial increase in introspection but they should not remain in this stance. To do so would be a vocational countersign. Gradually, self-acceptance will be manifest in growing relaxation and increased

peace and joy. Self will be seen as sinner, yes, but loved sinner.

Love of self will be the mature fruit of being called to live an enclosed life. Contrary to what one may at first think, authentic self-love is not the first of the virtues to be acquired; rather, almost the last. It presupposes a being rooted in God, a finding of one's personal identity in relation to God. When God is enough, enclosure simply provides a set of creative limits which heighten this awareness.

This God who becomes known on the Mount Sinai of enclosed life is a God who acts strongly, who calls, promises, cajoles, "threatens." This is a God who relates in very real ways, forming a people "peculiarly His own." (Dt. 7:6) Enclosure permits no easy escape from this God who is always with us, who wants us for Himself.

God fills the small world of enclosed life; this is the attractiveness of His call, the promise of presence that he offers. And the threat implied in divine-human relationship. If God is everything... there is nothing much left for self. In the desert of enclosure most of the customary disguises of the ego become useless. The brick-building of Egypt no longer justifies one's existence; gathering manna is no longer self-satisfying. While the temptation to idol-making remains a real possibility, the opportunity to be formed by God's commandments becomes a gift offered in community.

Again, we are given a choice: either to escape into a shrinking world of mounting dissatisfaction or to move up the mountain of Sinai. To accept the latter invitation is to be caught up in the cloud of God's presence, to perceive the promise of revealed glory.

It is to enter into a day-by-day experience of the paschal mystery that is intense and concentrated. Without the distractions that form the backdrop of most human lives, everything stands revealed as part of this fundamental option. We are always choosing either life or death. We decide to pass through death now for the sake of life everlasting or we opt for immediate satisfaction and put off our dying until the end, when it may be too late. Like the Israelites enclosed in the desert, we are asked to choose which God we will serve. It is a life/death choice.

As part of our choice we are also offered a clearer vision of that promised land which is the Kingdom of God. Enclosure maps the boundaries of this kingdom in certain clear and specific ways, making clear that in it all are united to all. Time and distance are not obstacles. Place, space, race, make no difference. The only persons who are excluded are those who exclude themselves by refusing to accept the all-inclusiveness that is the wideness of God's mercy. In the striking phrase of John Shea, the invitation to the heavenly banquet is open to "all who want to feast with all." (STORIES OF FAITH, Thomas More Press, 1980, p. 171). Paradoxically enough, it is this universal openness which reinforces the separateness of enclosure. As we have already said, the going apart is for the sake of



being more a part. The solitude and silence highlight union with a God whose "taste" is catholic, and also the intrinsic unity of all human persons in the one body of Christ.

If enclosure does not bear this fruit of experienced union, the dangers inherent in it become too great. But when one is called and when one responds authentically, the gift of growing oneness becomes apparent. Horizons of caring are expanded and love reaches out from neighbor to neighbor in an ever expanding chain of concern. Situations described in the news make a difference in the way one lives; persons never met become personal responsibility. Asians and Africans caught up in the crossfire of political violence are as real as any more immediate neighbor. Faces of slum children are no longer just pictures; their cries are heard, perhaps even more really than if they were shouting in the streets where one lives.

At the same time that enclosed life expands vision, it also particularizes, another of its paradoxes. The neighbor whose voice is heard is quite specific. Some hear one voice, some another. The call is vocational. In some instances this may be as natural a response as someone who has been ill hearing the voices of others who are sick. At other times there is no human logic to explain that the call to concern spotlights these individuals rather than others. No matter the "why" of this vocational concern; what is important is the difference it makes in experienced connectedness.

At the same time that God's love is perceived in its universal openness and concrete application to specific neighbors, enclosure also reveals the priority of "God alone." In the past this phrase was often bannered over the monastery door and it is no accident that "monk" and "monastery" both have their verbal roots in the single-mindedness of the "one." Living within enclosure focuses life on the "one thing necessary." It is a deliberate reduction of other choices for the sake of making one choice more strongly. The kingdom which is coming is God's alone. And in the end we will either choose to be chosen by God or we will be left outside the kingdom. This final choice is a solitary one. We make it alone and we alone can make it.

Just as enclosure brings together all-inclusiveness and solitariness, so also does it place in creative tension the truth of God's being universally present and the inability of any place or space to contain this divine presence. God is everywhere and nowhere! Fidelity to an enclosed life involves a "yes" to both of these. Divine presence can be discovered in any place, in any set of circumstances. There is no need to search out special places, spots of great natural beauty or historic significance. Sacred shrines are less necessary for no place is really profane. Every place is sacred.

So stay where you are. Here is your place of meeting. Looking for God abroad is unnecessary; it may even be defeative. In the limits of your personal past, the confines of your possible future, the divine is being offered to you. Your body is a meeting tent; your psyche, the place where redemption is being effected. So too the opportunities or lack of them that our culture affords us; the gifts and poverties of the particular place where we live: all of this is holy ground. We have only to stand where we are and be grateful. Then our openness to receive will bring us into divine presence. Spatial limits open out in transcendent possibility.

In speaking of the going beyond that begins by embracing where we are, we caught up again the incarnational elements of our humanness. Enclosure is material and spiritual; it is external and physical but it is also interior and transcendent. Over-emphasis on either dimension dehumanizes the whole. When external, physical space is stressed too much, the spirit is lost. Either it becomes complacent, satisfied, having achieved one more spiritual goal or it goes to the opposite extreme and rebels against what it perceives as truncating spiritual meaning and so attempts to live without limits. Enclosure is primarily a matter of spiritual space, a place where persons meet God. Being where we are is basic to this meeting and the challenge which enclosure enunciates.

Listening for the divine, waiting for it, looking for it in the everyday of this time/place is at the heart of living out an enclosed life. When this attitude moves an individual to make a vow of enclosure, and when this profession is lived out in authentic acceptance of limits for the sake of deeper interior life, then what is enclosed is rich and expansive. This space, any place, makes possible a divine breakthrough. God is here. So are we. And so is everyone else. □

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Long tradition in the Order of St. Clare provides for a fourth vow of enclosure and the newly approved CONSTITUTIONS of the Order maintain this tradition. Though other contemplative communities observe enclosure they do not make it a special vow. The present article does not take a position on the somewhat controversial question of whether it should be subject matter of a vow; rather it intends to explore the meaning of present practice. What is said could also be applied to any gospel counsel, including those fourth vows which other communities have made to emphasize their particular charism.



## Two August Failures

I  
 Lord,  
 if in creation's realm  
 there does exist  
 that state of being  
 tired, too tired  
 to free the gift of poetry,  
 then I am there.  
 August heaps me,  
 and I am maimed, drained,  
 unable now to even sing  
 my weariness.

II  
 To further demonstrate  
 my state of belly-up,  
 the guards just brought  
 some pizza in,  
 two pieces nice and warm,  
 and I myself devoured one slice  
 realizing far too late  
 that I had three  
 young kids on break  
 and probably the pizza was  
 for all of us.  
 In shame I cut  
 the other piece  
 into three tiny token  
 slivers,  
 and gave them my potato chips  
 to salve my selfish beast.

Anthony Chiarilli

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