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THE HISTORY OF FRANCISCAN THEOLOGY

Edited by Kenan B. Osborne, OFM

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• H • E $\mathbf{C \cdot O \cdot R \cdot D}$ Clare of Assisi: Our Model The Vocation of Clare of Assisi Clare of Assisi: Woman of Poverty, Peace, Prayer Ciaran McInally, OFM Conv and Joseph Wood, OFM Conv. 16 Clare of Assisi: A Saint for Now Mary Francis, PC......21 Clare's Form of Life: A Light for Us Clare and Intimacy with the Lord Madge Karecki, SSJ-TOSF......32 Leastitute Spritual Direction of A Contemplative Pacelli Millane, OSC......37 About our Contributors. 47

TRANCISCAN SPIRITUAL REVIEW

THE CORD

A Franciscan Spiritual Review

Editor: Elise Saggau, OSF

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- 2. The University of Chicago *Manual of Style*, 13 ed., is to be consulted on general questions of style.
- Titles of books and periodicals should be italicized or, in typed manuscripts, underlined.
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- 4. References to Scripture sources or to basic Franciscan sources should not be footnoted, but entered within parenthesis immediately after the cited text, with period following the closed parenthesis. For example:

(1Cor. 13:6). (RegNB 23:2). (2Cel 5:8). (4LAg 2:13).

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The Cord, 45.4 (1995)

Editorial

Traditionally *The Cord* devotes a summer issue to Clare of Assisi. Two years ago the Church celebrated the 800th anniversary of her birth. This event occasioned an intensification of writings about her, as well as updated translations of her own writings and of the earliest sources for her biography. Today we have unprecedented access to fine and authentic materials that help us to know better this outstanding medieval woman who, with Francis of Assisi, began a movement in the Church that has affected innumerable lives over the centuries.

In Virgin Time, Patricia Hampl expresses her impression of how Franciscans seem to know their founders personally. "They [speak] of Francis and Clare as of people who had just left the room for a moment."1 There is something in the character of these "beginners" that transcends time and makes them seem not only still alive to us, but as intimate and accessible as our own brothers and sisters. It has been asserted that no other founders of religious orders are remembered by their followers with so much genuine affection and familiarity as Francis and Clare. They themselves laid claim to no special honor; their preference for humility, littleness, poverty and servanthood makes them seem to us, as they seemed to their contemporaries, very approachable. While they were highly respected by their followers, Clare and Francis nevertheless made others feel as though they were walking side by side with them, not on higher ground, not ahead. While they are called "Father" and "Mother," and rightly so, we know from their own writings and witness that they themselves aspired to be "brother" and "sister." They repeatedly held up, as the ideal of community life, brotherhood and sisterhood—what Clare called "the unity of mutual love" (RCl 4: 22: 10:7).

The charm that surrounds our memories of them may have been affected to some extent by a certain medieval Italian romanticism which attends the hagiographic process. But this cannot account for the full effect of this charm down through the centuries; a charm which continues to attract followers from all walks of life, all social stratas, all nationalities. The universal attractiveness of Francis and Clare has

within it the very charm of the Spirit of God, which continues Its holy manner of working in all times and places.

In this issue of *The Cord*, we meet Clare again in and through the reflections of Franciscan persons who, in our time, claim special relationship with her. Some are "Poor Clares" themselves, and their writings reveal the kind of intimacy which comes from walking closely in Clare's footprints in the very way of life she established 800 years ago. Some are friars whose personal spirituality has been enriched by this sister. One is a member of the Third Order Regular, who has found in Clare a luminous guide in the challenging work of living the Gospel way. Two of our contributors are "voices from the past": the reflections of Ignatius Brady, OFM, and Mary Francis, PC, were published in *The Cord* in 1953, on the occasion of the 700th centenary of Clare's death. Their messages continue to be "good news" for us today.

Endnote

¹ Patricia Hampl, Virgin Time (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992) 117.

The Cord, 45.4 (1995)



Ignatius Brady, OFM

Frederick Ozanam says somewhere that there seems no great movement in the Church of God in which a woman does not share. How true this is even a momentary reflection on history will convince us. Planted by Francis in the "garden" of San Damiano, Clare of Assisi fast became the purest expression of his ideal, his greatest rival in the pursuit of Gospel perfection. All her life was a struggle to hold fast to that holiness of life and highest poverty which he had taught and had, at the end, exhorted in his "final will" for the Poor Ladies; and when Clare died on August 11, 1253, the world lost its purest witness to the true spirit of Saint Francis.

We may know her story; yet we must rehearse it again for ourselves, not to know the facts, but to love and to imitate her example. Unless we imitate what we celebrate, our festivals have a hollow ring and are without purpose. To know and love Clare, to imitate her, to celebrate her, we must know what Francis meant for her and what therefore he means for us. She must be our teacher in the ways of Francis, our model in our approach to and in our imitation of him and of the Christ in whose footprints he walked.

Her Vocation

When Clare lay dying in the first days of August 1253, her agony intensified by her inability to take food, Brother Reynaldo (perhaps

her confessor) approached to exhort her to patience in the midst of such sufferings. Clare answered his kind words quite pointedly: "Dearest Brother, from the time that I learned of the grace of God through His servant Saint Francis, no suffering has ever troubled me, no penance has been too hard, no infirmity too great." One divines that on her bed of pain her thoughts had gone back to those early days when God had given her the grace of her vocation through Francis, for it was in that vocation that she found strength to bear her sickness.

Such a remark reveals to us the role Francis played in her vocation. She had heard him preach at Assisi's cathedral of San Rufino, and the good ground of her heart opened to receive his words. She had gone to him at the Portiuncula and revealed what God had already inspired in her, a desire to serve Him alone. As the bridesman of Christ, Francis was quick to react (cf. CL 5-6), exhorting her to contempt of the world, showing her in vivid words the emptiness of earthly hopes and the deceptiveness of earthly beauty, portraying for her the sweet espousals of Christ, persuading her to keep the pearl of her maidenly purity for that blessed Bridegroom Whom love had made human. As she consented, God gave her a glimpse of heavenly joys, and earthly delights paled into insignificance, while her heart became afire with longing for the wedding of the Lamb.

Forthwith she committed herself wholly to the guidance of Francis, taking him to be, after God, the director of her new life. Henceforth her soul was guided by his holy teachings, and with warm and ready heart she took to herself whatever he told her of the good Jesus.

How she carried out their mutual plan, fleeing from home and being received at the Portiuncula and installed at last at San Damiano with her sister Agnes (who also followed her in death in November 1253), we know full well. But can we truly say that we have known and received the grace of our vocation through Saint Francis? When we entered the Order, was it under the inspiration received from the Poverello and with the conscious desire to follow what he taught by example and word of the imitation of Christ? Or did we "just happen" to join the sons and daughters of Francis? Does he now occupy such a place in our thoughts and desires that we constantly turn to him for instruction in our way of life, searching his Rule and Admonitions and other writings for the pattern we must follow? Do we above all turn to him in prayer, to thank him for our vocation, to ask him to be for us the leader of our way?

Her Model

Again, toward the end of her life, before her final illness, Clare

looked back over the forty or more years of her life of poverty and sacrifice and wrote her *Testament*. Francis had been dead for a quarter of a century, long since inscribed in the canon of the Saints and buried deep down beneath the great basilica that crowned Assisi. Yet, for her he lived, lived in her mind and in her heart and in her life. "The Son of God has been made for us the Way which our Blessed Father Francis, His true lover and imitator, has shown and taught us by word and example" (TestCl 5).

Then, like Francis in his Testament, Clare delineates the growth of the Poor Ladies, always under the guarding eye and guiding hand of the blessed Father. "Through his wonderful life and teachings, ... [he encouraged us] . . . to the love of holy poverty and its observance. . . . Francis was our pillar [of strength] and, after God, our one consolation and support" (TestCl 26,34, 38). What she learned from him on the Way, the path of Christ, she would pass on to others, and in the end warn, admonish, and exhort them to follow: "Strive to follow the way of simplicity, humility and poverty, that upright and holy pattern of life, as we were taught from the beginning of our conversion to Christ through our blessed Father Francis." She teaches her sisters to love one another as members of one household, to have the spirit of prayer and devotion, to pursue poverty to the extreme, to live in unity and community. She addresses superiors (though neither Clare nor Francis use such a high-sounding word!). They are to fulfill their office by virtue and example before all else, knowing they are appointed or elected not for the dignity but for the burden, the good of others (TestCl 61-66). She addresses subjects (this word they will use!). They are to remember that for God's sake they have given up their own wills (TestCl 67-70).

This, very briefly, was the pattern of life which Francis had given his sons and through Clare his daughters. For Clare, as later for Bonaventure, the grace of God our Savior had appeared in Francis to all truly humble and lovers of holy Poverty, for these are taught by his example to deny ungodliness and worldly desires, to live conformed to Christ and to thirst with unwearied desire for the blessed hope held out to them. God raised him up to be a true follower, leader and herald of Gospel perfection, a light to those who believed, that he might prepare for the Lord the way of light and peace in the hearts of the faithful.

Clare our Model

In the Providence of God, every Founder gives to his little flock a

certain way of following Christ, a certain *nota*. Pius XI called it a character which must be impressed on the community. Need we then stress the obvious: that this is precisely what Saint Clare tried to impress on her own daughters? For them Francis was their model and example in the footsteps of Christ, so that they must look to him if they would be faithful to the graces of their vocation. Is she not, then, our teacher also, showing us how we are to approach Francis and what we are to find in him to imitate?

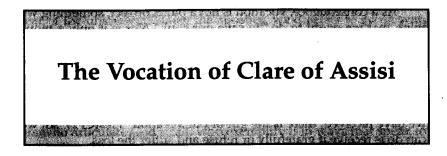
Following her lead, let us make the following practical conclusions on the basis of her approach:

First, do not let Saint Francis be a hazy figure of the distant past. There is always a danger that we think of him, as indeed of Christ Himself, as an historical figure of long ago and not as someone alive and present and important in our life, our daily life! Of course, seven hundred years separate us from Francis; whereas Clare knew him face to face and had to live but twenty-five years apart from him. Nineteen hundred years separate us from the earthly life of Jesus Christ. God grant we do not look on the Gospels and the Gospel life as ancient history! Christ is timeless, as is his teaching and his example; and so must Francis, in his own human way, be alive for us today, our teacher, leader, herald of the perfection of the holy Gospel, our channel, our mirror of Christ.

Secondly, stay close to the path pointed out by Francis. Do not neglect this fountain of life for other sources of spirituality. While indeed there is basically but one Way, with no substantial differences, there are, in the providence of God, diverse schools of spirituality based on particular approaches to Christian piety. These are often embodied in the spirit of an Order, its Rule and customs, its spiritual writers, its general outlook—and these incorporate the spirit of the Founder. Yet, how often, unfortunately for the individual and the community, do religious look elsewhere for guidance.

Thirdly, with Saint Clare, hang onto the words of Francis! It is all well and good to read the life of Saint Francis, provided we do not use some superficial, slanted version. But it is much better, more enriching and more rewarding to read and re-read, to ponder and to "chew" (as the medievals often said) the writings, the words of Francis himself. Here we go straight to the clear fountain, not to the rivulets. And if our reading is preceded and accompanied by devotion and prayer, his words cannot fail to take hold and shape our lives.

Lastly, we need a greater devotion to Clare, a love and appreciation of her, the purest mirror of Francis's ideals. May she help us to be little but vigorous and flowering plants of our God-given gardener!



Marie Beha, OSC

Introduction

Clare of Assisi was no theologian, no Scripture scholar. Though better educated than most women of her period and articulate above average for any century, Clare was first of all a realist. She lived what she believed; her faith was eminently practical. Perhaps that is one explanation for contemporary resurgence of interest in this saint who lived eight centuries ago.

We propose to examine her experience of vocation, not only her own contemplative Poor Clare call, but that invitation to personal response which God gives to each individual. We will do this by examining her writings and then suggesting some of the applications which can be made of her insights. We will consider:

Clare's understanding of being called; her description of response to God's gracious invitation; her guidelines for vocational discernment.

Clare's Understanding of Being Called

At the very heart of Clare's lived theology of vocation is the belief that call comes from God. The initiative is divine; even our response is only possible through God's enabling power. Clare is very clear on this and states her belief strongly: "The Lord Who has given a good beginning will also give the increase" (TestCl 77). And in her Rule, written at the very end of her life, she returns to the same theme: "If by divine inspiration someone comes to us desiring to embrace our life. . ."(RCl 2:1). Vocation is always a work of the Spirit, "inspiring" our minds and attracting our hearts.

As a consequence, vocation is not a pious project, something we think that we ought to do "to save our soul." Nor is it only a pious idea: "I think religious life is more perfect." It is too personal to fit into such abstract categories. Nor is it something we determine, a desire we seek to fulfill. No matter how strong our wanting or our willing we cannot simply decide on a call, nor set careful boundaries around our response. As Clare says, vocation is gift: "Among the other gifts that we have received, there is the gift of our vocation" (TestCl 2). All we can do is receive it gratefully or refuse and suffer the loss.

Since vocation is God's inspiration we cannot perceive it directly. There is no special divine revelation with attendant thunder and lightning. All that we perceive immediately are its effects in our lives. God's call manifests itself in such good fruits as peace and happiness, a certain sense of "rightness," of having found a home. Over time we also grow in freedom and in self-knowledge. The latter, of course, can be a kind of two-edged sword. We want to know ourselves better, but we also fear what such self-knowledge might reveal about ourselves.

Some of the most authentic signs of a divinely inspired call wear just such negative faces: self-knowledge that humbles us, growing freedom that uncovers deeper layers of unfreedom. Feelings of repugnance and resistance are paradoxical evidences of God's action in our lives, since we do not resist what we do not experience as demandingly real. These may be even more relevant than the more enjoyable fruits of joy and peace, just because they are less likely to be counterfeit.

Vocation is a present reality calling for immediate response. It changes our here and now. But vocation also points beyond itself into that future which will be eternal. This is its excitement, as Clare points out to her friend, Agnes of Bohemia: "By divine inspiration you have made yourselves daughters and servants of the Most High King, the heavenly Father, and have taken the Holy Spirit as your spouse choosing to live according to the perfection of the holy gospel" (RCL 8:4). Our God-given call is infinitely great; enough to last forever. No surprise that we presently experience it as beyond us.

Clare speaks of "holy vocation" (TestCl 17), "lofty profession" (TestCl 37), "the path of the Lord" (TestCl 74) and of "being called to such great things" (TestCl 21). No wonder she was always grateful for the work of divine love in her soul.

As gift, vocation is first and foremost given to the individual per-

son. We are called in our uniqueness. Our vocation is "handmade," as it were, to express God's preferential love for us. But to recognise this and respond with appropriate gratitude requires the vision of faith. What may be first apparent is the element of sacrifice. We experience fear of the unknown. Unlike the apostles, we'd prefer to go on with whatever form of "fishing" was previously our livelihood. We may grow into gratitude only with a life-time of experience. So it is worth noting that Clare's own expressions of giftedness come from her Testament, written toward the end of her life.

This gift of individual vocation is incarnational, expressed in every detail of our lives. It is also communitarian, coming through others who articulate God's call, who exemplify it in ways that speak to our hearts. That was certainly the way in which Clare heard God's call. She proclaims in her Testament: "After the most high heavenly Father saw fit in His mercy and grace to enlighten my heart, that I should do penance according to the example and teaching of our most blessed Father Francis. . ." (14). Francis was God's "voice" and Clare was eternally grateful to him.

This mediation of others often follows the paths of ordinary human relations, networks of grace among families and friends. In Clare's case, it was probably through her cousin Rufino that she was first introduced to Francis. And Clare herself, later on, exerted the same kind of familial influence, inviting her sisters Catherine and Beatrice and eventually even her own mother to join the Poor Sisters. Receiving our vocation through others and passing on what we have received is our vocational geneology. We could trace it with the same desire to learn more of our roots that prompts us to trace our family trees.

The gift of personal vocation becomes increasingly specific over the course of a lifetime, as we see in Clare's case. Even before her birth there were hints of her future call. A story, testified to by witnesses during the Process of Canonization, recalled how her mother knew that her daughter would someday be a "great light" which would illumine the world" (Proc 6:12). Similarly Francis, working to repair the church of San Damiano, prophesied that someday it would house a group of Poor Ladies who would "glorify our heavenly Father throughout His holy universal church by their celebrated and holy manner of life" (TestCl 14).

Moving from prophecy to realization, Clare's vocation unfolded in her home under the careful nurturing of her mother, Ortulana, and the pious women who joined with Ortulana to form a group of penitents. During her adolescence, Clare freely choose to respond to the gospel's challenge to sell her goods and give to the poor. She went so far as to give away her patrimony and some of what belonged to her sister Catherine. Her practice of prayer and piety was such that she already had a reputation for holiness before she ever meet Francis. Having refused marriage, she was ready and waiting for God's further call. It was not long in coming.

On Palm Sunday, 1212, she left her home and joined Francis and his band of brothers. She knew she would be Franciscan. But did she know that God was inviting her to found and lead a whole new movement for religious women? Did she have an inkling of how her vocation would continue to unfold for 40 years? No; like us, all she could do was be "awake" and ready for each coming of the Lord. Hers was a life of faith's unfolding. The mystery of her vocation became increasingly clear as the years went on, just as ours does.

Though vocation is first of all a gift of increasingly specific invitation given to an individual person, it is also a gift given in a particular community context. No one's call is ever realized apart from others. It affects most those who are closest to us. For Clare these others were first her family and relatives, who responded, some with opposition, others with admiration and imitation. But that was only the beginning. Over the years, her vocation unfolded within the growing community of Poor Sisters with whom she lived. Together they grew in holiness, learning how they were to be for each other as the Spirit worked in each of their hearts. It could not have been easy, as Clare testifies, recalling "deprivation, poverty, hard work, trial, shame, contempt of the world"(TestCl 28). Over the years there were added the misunderstanding and even opposition of church authorities, the seeming lack of support even from Francis himself, the loneliness of the vision of her vocation, shared by few. In the end, however, it is all "mercy" and "kindness," as we read in her Testament (15), not only for the herself, but for others.

Vocation is also a gift given by the community which receives the individual. Clare spoke of the sisters whom the Lord had given her (TestCl 25) and describes their vocation as the mutuality of sisters. She also prescribed in her Rule that whenever an aspirant asked to join the Poor Sisters, all the members of the community would have equal vote as to whether she would be received among them (RCl 2:1). In this way she expresses the life-long mutual responsibility for individual and community to nurture vocation, to grow in it and to give thanks for it. Specifically it requires community to welcome newcomers, to be patient with their introduction into community, willing to make the sacrifices that will undoubtably be part of the adjustment process, as well as be part of their formation by the power of their example.

Finally, vocation is gift given to and for the whole Church. So Clare speaks of the sisters not only being an example to each other but of living in such a way that they build up the whole Body of Christ (TestCl 58-60). Clare saw her Poor Sisters' vocation as firmly rooted in the Church; so she struggled all her life for confirmation of the way of life she professed, obtaining approval of her Rule only on her deathbed.

She wanted candidates to be examined "concerning the Catholic faith and the sacraments of the church" (RCl 2:3), and she desired that all the sisters realize that, hidden as they were in the very heart of God, their fidelity or infidelity carried consequences for others greater than they could imagine.

With typical practicality, Clare understands that this life of living the gospel with its attendant conversion is to be realized in a particular monastery where each is to be "a mirror and example" for all her Sisters and for whole world (TestCl 1:9).

Vocational Response

As we have already seen, Clare's theology of vocation places special emphasis on call as gift. But gifts are gifts only if received as such. So her equal stress on gratitude: "Among the other gifts that we have received and do daily receive . . . and for which we must express the deepest thanks to the Glorious Father of Christ, there is our vocation" (TestCl 2). Note that gratitude is not a once in a while sort of thing, saved for anniversaries or jubilees; it is something that rises daily in our hearts. We give thanks each day because our call is new each day, i.e., renewed as we experience this day the liberating love of God in ways we have never known before. Ingrid Peterson, in a lecture given in Tampa in 1994, spoke of vocation as a "gift that keeps on giving." Clare would have agreed with such a dynamic understanding.

None of which rules out an honest expression of reluctance. Though in our better moments we experience call as treasure, at other times we are reluctant, even resistent to its demands. We would rather remain where we are, safe and secure, than attempt to cross desert.

To go beyond this very human fear of the divine, Clare stresses vocational response as "choice" (TestCl 16). No one can choose for us; not our family; not some well-meaning advisor. We must say our own "yes," repeating it deeply and often, in good times and in bad, as well as in the ordinary times that make up most of our days.

But we choose only what we know. Clare requires that the "tenor of our life be thoroughly explained to her [the candidate] so she can

make a knowledgeable choice" (RCl 2:6). This responsibility of informing newcomers falls, first of all, on the abbess and the novice director, as Clare points out (RCl 2:20). But ultimately it is a concern of the whole community, since it is their life together which will be the most formative of all. What we live is what we see lived. And we are especially vulnerable to being formed by the words and example of others in our beginnings.

Informed choice, important though it is, is still not enough. We must respond with all the freedom that is ours. We must choose and choose strongly. As Clare reminds Agnes of Prague: "You have rejected all those things and have chosen with your whole heart and soul a life of poverty and destitution" (1LAg 6). This choice of ours must be repeated often, surely daily, and in all the various circumstances of life. It needs to be professed in whatever way this can be done: written, spoken to others, and, most of all, affirmed before God.

One of the paradoxes of vocational responsibility is that freedom is combined with a certain "existential necessity," as Sandra Schneider terms it. God invites our response, waits upon it, but never forces our compliance. Though we experience God's exquisite courtesy we also know we "must" answer . . . now . . . and in this way, not for God's sake but for our own.

We also perceive God's freedom and our own as we experience our repeated "delays" in response, our compromises, even our refusals. We can say "no" . . . and we do! But God never says "no" to us. There are always more gifts to be given, different ones, depending on our response. Even though we are unfaithful, God remains faithful and generous. It is this unfailing generosity of God which helps us continue growing in freedom and responsibility. The answer we give to God makes a difference, an eternal difference. Yet our choice should not be a nervous one. God does not play a pea-under-the-shell game with us: one choice and we had better get it right. If we search for our vocation, we will find it, because we will be found.

The third element of vocational response that receives special stress in Clare's lived theology is that of perseverance. She reminds Agnes of Prague: "Always remember your resolution and be conscious of your beginning" (2LAg 11). And "If anyone would suggest something contrary to your divine vocation, even though you must respect him, do not follow his counsel" (2LAg 17).

Life-long perseverance despite opposition is more than we can do. It too is a gift of God. "The Lord Himself, Who has given a good beginning, will also give the increase and final perseverance" (TestCl 78). But like vocation itself, perseverance calls for a corresponding response on our part. We choose, as definitively as we can, as specifically as we can. Then we can safely leave the burden of proving something to others; first of all, to God who cares for us so much and then to the members of our community.

This commitment, once made needs to be incarnated in all the various circumstances of our life. We need to find ways to live out our call here and now. As Clare says, if someone decides to enter the Poor Sisters, then: "Let the words of the holy gospel be addressed to her that she should go and sell all that she has and take care to distribute the proceeds to the poor" (RCl 2:7). It was a response that Clare had given even before she joined Francis, when she sold her patrimony as witness of her desire to live as a poor woman.

In summary, committed response is validated in life changes. Conversion remains a staple of Franciscan vocational response. "After the Most high heavenly Father saw fit in His mercy and grace to enlighten my heart to do penance according to the example and teaching of our most blessed father Francis, a short while after his conversion, I together with a few sisters whom the Lord had given me after my conversion . . ."(TestCl 24). Perseverance, then, does not just mean holding steady; more realistically it means changing in the light of our call. Unless we do that we cannot expect to receive the gift of perseverance. So it is relevant to ask: Do we know what needs to be changed in the light of God's invitation? Can we be told by others, by life circumstances? Are we able to change or are we too old, too unwilling? Can we risk asking for the gift of persevering in conversion of life for all the days of our life?

Discerning Vocation

Discernment has been described as "having a noticing heart." Clare certainly did. She relied on this gift of the Spirit at work in her own life and in the lives of her Sisters and imbedded its practice in her Rule. Here we will concentrate on a few of the suggestions she makes relevant to vocational discernment in a contemplative community.

In the section on formation in her Rule, she describes both positive and negative signs indicative of a candidate's capacity for Poor Clare life. She speaks of the abbess's responsibility to see that there is no "impediment to her [the candidate's] observance of this life" (RCl 2:5). She goes on to list some of these, beginning with "advanced age." In Clare's day, as in our own, the question of how old is too old was a more complex issue than simply chronology. We know that Clare received her own mother among the Poor Sisters so could not have ad-

mitted only young women. Then, as now, the issue is capacity to adapt, to change, along with sufficient health to sustain the transition to a radically different life-style. Today the tendency is to accept older candidates into religious life and to raise serious question about someone being too young. In her day, Clare, according to the custom of the time, received young girls into the monastery, provided for their needs and only admitted them to the novitiate if they freely chose to enter. This emphasis on the maturity necessary to make a free and deliberate choice remains a relevant criterion.

Clare also speaks of ill health as an impediment. What kind of health is needed for monastic life? In cases of doubt, for example those raised by a chronic illness, it is probably better to give someone an opportunity to try the life and see how she responds to it. Some may even grow stronger in the steady rhythm of the monastery; in other cases illness may make it impossible for an individual to get beyond sickness and so enter into the life.

As a third impediment, Clare speaks of "mental weakness." The term is apt for what today we would call mental illness or a personality disorder. Again the discernment focuses around how this affects the individual's capacity to live our form of life; especially how it affects relationships. Such illness can be far more crippling than a life-threatening physical sickness. Here one must distinguish lack of emotional balance from passing problems caused by stress or associated with the emptying of the unconscious that is part of growth in prayer.

Finally Clare reiterates church teaching that a candidate must be unmarried, or, "if married, her husband has taken a vow of chastity." We know that, in practice, Clare admitted widows. Today we face the complicated questions of divorce, annulment, homosexual relationships and having had children outside of marriage. Some questions are so delicate that only the most general policies can be made; both the individual and the community must be considered. Hard as it may seem, in cases of doubt, the benefit must be given to the community in view of the greater good..

Negative criteria clearly indicate that a vocation is lacking; the candidate should not be received. But lack of impediment does not equal a call; positive signs must be discernible and with equal clarity. In this section of her Rule, Clare only indicates one positive criterion: the candidate must "profess and believe the Catholic faith (RCl 2:3-4). It is a discernment question equally important today when so many are unchurched or, while baptized, have never practiced the faith. Ours is a period of religious confusion, much like Clare's own. Like her we live in a post-conciliar era and experience the special stress of religious

upheaval. Some who seek admittance have only recently come into the Church and are in their first fervor of conversion. However they lack the balance of mature practice. Others have channeled all their spiritual energy in one direction; for example into the Charismatic or Cursillo movements, and now confuse a desire to go deeper with a call to religious life. Still others are cradle Catholics but with very limited instruction in their faith, knowing little of how it affects daily life. There are no easy answers; the focus of concern needs to be whether this person has a solid enough foundation to support the building which she is being call to build.

Always the fundamental discernment criteria are: can this person live the life she is considering? does she desire it enough to make the necessary sacrifices? Neither question can be answered with absolute certitude. We can only make a rough estimate of ability; we can never judge motivation. We must concern ourselves with prioritizing the required dispositions, as Clare herself does for those wanting to become Poor Sisters.

Naturally enough she places the ability to live in poverty as one of her first priorities, along with a capacity for obedience and chastity. The vows are radical renunciations; they require a bedrock of maturity. Otherwise an individual may be fixated on fulfilling security needs, working through adolescent rebellion against authority or seeking the apparent safety of a single-sex environment.

Along with a capacity for living the vowed life, there is the even more radical requirement of desiring to do so in this particular community at this particular time in its history. Living in close community is always demanding; doing so in an enclosed community requires some very special ways of relating to others. One must be capable of close interpersonal relationships as well as the solitude necessary for growth in contemplative prayer. And this with the same people for all the days of one's life. It is a large order for discernment. Unless solid evidence of growth in these directions can be observed in concrete behavior, a vocation is not present; the candidate should not be accepted.

As if this were not enough already, Clare goes on to add some other criteria: contentment with simple work; ability to preserve the spirit of prayer and to find nourishment in the liturgy; above all one must be willing to sustain continued conversion. It is the work of a lifetime. That is the promise and the challenge of God's call inviting our free response. It will fill our life, be fulfilled in our death and give glory to God for all eternity.

The Cord, 45.4 (1995)



Clare of Assisi: Woman of Poverty, Peace, Prayer

Ciaran McInally, OFM Conv. and Joseph Wood, OFM Conv.

On January 10, 1993, Pope John Paul II observed the 800th anniversary of the birth of Saint Clare with an address to the Poor Clares commending her as a role model of poverty, peace and prayer. The Papal visit to the Clares of Assisi was a providential event, coinciding with a gathering of international religious leaders in Assisi to pray for world peace. The immediate focus of their attention was the tragic situation in former Yugoslavia.

It was shortly after these notable events that the Italian-American artist, Mark Balma, a long time local resident of Assisi and a student of

the late Pietro Annigoni, approached Bishop Sergio Goretti with the request to fresco new art in the barren nave of the Basilica of Saint Clare. Balma's intention, supported by the benefactors of the Saint Paul Foundation in Minnesota, was to reflect the Papal admonitions, reminding all people that prayer and simplicity of lifestyle are our only secure defense against evil and self-destruction.

In August, 1994, after developing preliminary sketches in collaboration with the Poor Clares themselves, Balma began the actual frescoing. On October 3, 1994, the official closing of the Clare celebrations, the Italian Ministry of Art dedicated the three new panels and the Bishop of Assisi blessed them.

Balma thoughtfully adapted the very style and movement of the three frescoed episodes to the structure which would house the art. The Basilica of Saint Clare, though patterned after the Basilica of Saint Francis, is a narrower structure, more supple in form, quiet of stature. A softness of embracing light envelopes the pilgrim in calm and peace. The overall feeling is a sense of giving, of the darkness of impending birth, of a womb nurturing life in others. We are invited to stay awhile, to reflect and meditate on the life of this woman from centuries past who still speaks so profoundly today.

Woman of Poverty



In the first panel on the left, we see Clare receiving alms from a young woman. Although the friars were the official beggars for the Poor Ladies (as they were titled during Clare's lifetime), what we see here is that many of the townspeople also brought food to the sisters. In this instance, a young woman, perhaps impressed by the lifestyle of Clare, may be considering entrance into the community. The artist's intention to subdue the work in monochrome coloration, serenely blending the story into the stark walls of the nave, directs our attention to this young woman's soft and radiant expression, thoroughly absorbed in the face of the Mother Abbess. Although just the slightest

profile of Clare's face can be distinguished, she appears fatigued. Clare, we must remember, was severely ill, even bedridden, for many years. In this first panel Clare is shown as a woman who is not an ethereal saint. She struggled with the day-to-day routine of caring for others and praying for a suffering world. Although interiorly at peace, as ever attested by her biographers, she was, like us, a human person who became tired. It is the glow on the face of the young woman which

offers new hope, new life. We may even say, using her own spiritual imagery, that Clare's face, far from being hidden, is mirrored in the face of the young woman. This bond of young and old speaks of the sacredness of the cycle of life. Others will take our place. Ours is but a short moment upon this earth. The two women have become one, past and future.

The very starkness of the cloistered walls, a striking element of the entire triptych, might suggest that Clare's hidden life was a barren existence. Yet this primary encounter of young and old reminds us of the paradox of the Song of Songs, which speaks poetically of sojourning in the desert in order to meet God. Only there does the Divine bridegroom encounter his bride, Israel. This primary encounter of desert, enclosure, wedding, expectant fertility—the young woman and the elderly Clare—is again metaphorically mirrored through the doorway in a reinforcing secondary meditation. In the distant countryside we see the cypress trees rising in dignity on the right, imaging Clare's constant prayer, reaching ever toward the heavens. In ancient times the cypress was linked with the cult of the dead, representing immortality. The ark of Noah and the interior decoration of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem were paneled with cypress wood. In Christian usage, the ark of Noah and the Ark of the Covenant housed in the Temple have always symbolized the womb of the Virgin Mary. The womb offers new life and hope to the world through continual recreation. The lives of Clare and her contemplative sisters were no less fertile because they were virgins. We are all called to bring life into the world, to renew and to recreate life. Through the doorway the ancient olive trees appear on the left. They are proudly displaying their weathered years of struggle and growth, yet are still able to bear an abundance of fruit.

The elder Clare is willingly accepting the gift of food from the young woman through an expression of humility. In ancient liturgical traditions, the superior would offer the junior sister an embrace of peace by a reach from above. In this instance however, Clare, a woman who breaks the mold on so many religious traditions, is receiving the act of charity by extending her embrace of welcome from below. Clare, the virgin bride, is ever receptive to love incarnate.

The bundle of bread being offered is actually pieces of bread. This is not a fresh-baked loaf, but bits and pieces gathered from many houses. The young woman has learned from Clare's example and has humbled herself through begging. She even comes to the door barefooted in imitation of the Ladies whom she wishes to honor. We could say that the bundle is Eucharistic, incarnational. Her tender handling of the offering is reminiscent of the infant Christ. Again, in her writings, Clare

often reminded her sisters that each of their virginal wombs was the tabernacle of the Risen Christ. The contemplative was to give birth to Christ in every action.

Woman of Prayer

The panel on the right has Clare bowed down in humble prostration, acknowledging her nothingness before God, who is represented, yet barely seen, in the upper left corner, in the risen Christ of the San Damiano cross. The commission of the voice which spoke to Francis from this cross in the spring of 1204 is a constant theme for the Lady Clare: "Go and rebuild my house." She, like Francis, rebuilt the Church with spiritual stones. In her sufferings, in her penances, she became Christ crucified for the salvation of oth-



ers. Although enclosed, she was ever receiving visitors for spiritual counseling and medical treatment.

Unnoticed by the prayerful figure, a gentle breeze blows through the window reminding us of the prophet Isaiah's admonition that God speaks in the delicate zephyr, not in the storm wind. Christ is present in an enclosed convent through the life of contemplation, no less powerfully than in the active life.

The small sparrow, a plain and common bird of central Italy, often referred to as a "Franciscan bird, "perches on the windowsill, unafraid of the quiet world of this convent nest. It is safe; it speaks of home. In the same window, the olive branch appears, as in every panel. The fruit of the olive, so much a part of the staple food of the region, again reminds us of Clare's fertility. Her life is nurturing as oil for cooking, as fuel for light and warmth, as ointment for healing, as balm for anointing and commissioning.

Woman of Peace

The central panel represents the peace of Clare. She is engulfed in the rich lapis blue, so common in the background of Renaissance art. It is the blue of timelessness, the blue of marriage between heaven and earth. Clare's gaze is peaceful but intent. She is not staring blankly in ecstasy, but she is portrayed in active listening. We have trespassed into a moment of pure attention. In this central panel, Clare herself is radiant. In the other two panels the light radiates from the outside. Within Clare the light is that of the Beloved on whom she has gazed for so many years. Her active listening is a witness to her life of obedi

ence, a word deriving from the Latin root, *audire*, to hear, to listen. The added prefix makes it *ob-audire*, signifying attentive listening, so that the mind and the heart are given to the action. It is by being attentive to the will of God that we go forth to serve the needs of others.

Clare's hands and feet are overly large. As a woman of noble heri-



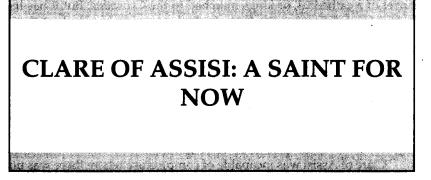
tage, Clare has willingly descended from her station to ascend into nobility of soul. She has lived the life of a hard-working peasant, making herself an example for all, earning her livelihood by the labor of her hands and relying on the generosity of others. Her pose directs the viewer's attention to the cross, two branches bound together, which in Clare's hands have become a scepter of royalty and a staff of shepherding. As in the other two panels, a fertile olive branch appears, blossoming forth from the stem of the cross. Clare's perseverance and confident trust in the providence of God have allowed her to be crowned with an aureole of olive sprigs, an ancient mythological symbol of Hercules crowning the winners of the Olympic Games, commissioning them to serve the gods. In a

Christian adaptation, the saints are commissioned to serve the Son of God.

Although the eighth centenary of the birth of Saint Clare is officially over, this new artistic creation will help keep alive the spirit of this noble woman.

Addendum: The three new frescoes were displayed in the Basilica of St. Clare for six months. They are now permanently housed in the museum of the Cathedral of San Rufino.

The Cord, 45.4 (1995)



Mary Francis, PC

Many persons have been impressed by the new perspective on hagiography given in the currently popular, *Saints for Now*. The fact that none of the gifted authors represented in the collection thought that Clare of Assisi was a saint-for-now may be a tribute to the obscurity she fostered, but it is also a judgment on the blindness of our age. The saints whose lives are sketched in the engaging collection can all ably prove their claim to belong to our "now;" but their company would certainly have been enriched by a certain barefoot nun with little laughter wrinkles around her beautiful, illness-hollowed eyes, and lips shaped as well for singing as for compassion. Two of the writers chose our Saint Francis as the saint-for-now. Did no one think of the utterly lovely lady whose life was the incarnation of his ideals?

To recognize Clare of Assisi as a saint-for-now, we need first to clarify the needs and to study the complexion of our times. Who was it said, so deliciously, that the hero of whom he wrote was "born in a troubled age—just as everyone else is!" It is easy to subscribe to the dour philosopher's view, crediting our age as the most desperately wicked of all epochs. Perhaps it is. We have managed to systematize cruelty beyond anything our forbears did in that line. We have com-

mercialized sin and made it a paying enterprise. We have also, however, proved that our wells of charity and goodness are far from dry, and have manifested a compassion far more vast than its antithetical cruelty. Our age is probably no more diabolically evil than the age which ignited Christians' bodies for lamps in its Roman parks; probably no better than the age when craft workers spent whole lives perfecting a turret of a cathedral, or kings marched to the Crusades. But it has its particular deficiencies, the first of which seems to be a lack of thorough-going courage. This is particularly evident in our own country where the vast majority are content to compromise with evil rather than to fight a clear-cut battle for the truth they own and the ideals they profess. Compromise is often a sin against courage, and we have become adept in its practice. Compromise and expediency are the watchwords taken up to silence the small clamor of consciences. And we like to forget that it is supernatural prudence which is praiseworthy, and that human prudence often gives insult to God.

Clare of Assisi was incapable of compromise where there was no room for alternative. We can all dream over the romance of her elopement to Saint Mary of the Angels, her investiture in the rough robe of poverty, her adamant stand against all and whoever opposed her ideals. Can we likewise rouse ourselves to a vital concept of what courage a girl of eighteen, wealthy, lovely, cherished and pursued, required to become the first daughter of the Poverello? Francis was an enigma to those to whom he was not an object of suspicion. His little ragged band of friars had no official status in the Church at that time. He had no security to offer the beautiful young Clare, not even to the extent of the next day's dinner (and one wonders where he contrived to get the shabby habit he threw over her fine gown)—nothing, in effect, but a dream as mad as the Gospel and his personal guarantee that, as his daughter, she would always be entitled to nothing at all.

Clare was no more a "dreamer" in the modern accepted sense of that word than was Francis. G. K. Chesterton has said that most of us are so "offcenter" in our mediocrity that we juxtapose our position with that of the true "centrics" and arrive at the remarkable conclusion that truesighted geniuses and literal-minded saints are the eccentrics. Francis and Clare were so centric that the world could defend its own pathetic dullness and cowardice only by calling them eccentric dreamers. Such courage as Clare had, to take absolutely everything on a principle she knew to be sound and true, is the antidote for our age poisoned with pusillanimity and the small, crawling fears for our comfort, our false security, our cultivated lethargy. The courage of a young girl who thought true values worth the highest stakes is the draught of

fresh air needed in our hothouse world of today. And, if we tend to dwell only on the beauty of the act of humiliation when Clare gripped hold of the altar with one hand and snatched off her veil with the other to uncover her shorn head before her raging relatives, we might also find there a trace of Clare's delightful humor, the humor that true courage always begets. The shorn lamb of Francis, facing those fulminating Italians, says the equivalent of: "And that, my dears, is that!" If we have forgotten how to laugh, it is because we have lost courage.

Thirty years later, ill and worn, this same brave woman could issue calm orders above the hue and cry of the fast-approaching barbarian invaders, and then face them with the serenity of faith, whispering to her Lover that sweet quasi-reproach of a sublime courage: "Deliver not, my Lord, to beasts, the souls of them who praise You." There never was a situation nor a person to daunt Clare. When some of the first friars lost heart and courage for the ideal of their Father, Francis turned his sad steps to San Damiano where there was one heart that never knew any diminution of faith in him or courage to cling to his ideal. Meditating on the overwhelming griefs of Francis in those day of "too many friars" and too little courage and on his humble turning to his first daughter for comfort and support, we feel a sense of warmest gratitude for Clare's constancy and the loyal courage of her Poor Ladies at San Damiano. The lines of Chesterton's exquisite carol might have been written as the cry of Francis's anguished heart as it healed at the monastery of his daughters: "O, weary, weary is the world; but here is all aright!" It was all aright because Clare had the courage of faith and taught it to her daughters. Not even the Pope could persuade her to turn a least left or a merest right from the straight path of Francis's teaching. Again, there is a trace of Clare's quiet humor in her sweetly humble but calculatedly adamant reply to Pope Gregory IX: "Holy Father, absolve me from my sins, but not from my vow of poverty." Courage like Clare's could remake the face of our wavering society today.

The breviary has astonishing comments to make on Clare. The same childlike calm boastfulness of: "Our God is in Heaven and does whatever He pleases" asserts that Clare is "more shining than light." God created light as the first miraculous diffusion of divine splendor. Holy Church lets Clare's daughters claim that God made in their Mother something to outshine light itself. Each August on her feast day, Poor Ladies throughout the world take up their breviaries and sing out, in how many hundreds of bare little choirs, that: "The brightness of Clare has filled the whole earth."

If we quote Chesterton again, let us lay the blame on his own

surpassing love for Francis and Clare. It was G. K. who insisted that "Chastity is not mere abstention... it is something [positive and] flaming." It was in Clare. Her purity was a white flame yearning up towards Love. It was radiant. It blazed. Only the pure really know how to love. And Clare, who was fashioned for loving, made no apologies for the rugged measures she took to preserve that wisdom. The thousands who endure tortures to effect a semblance of physical beauty in themselves shudder at the notion of a perpetual fast, a continual silence, an endless cycle of vigils and the other means Clare used to insure the beauty of her spirit and that of her daughters. With her, it was always a question of penance, yes, but penance for love's sake! She knew that without love, penance is as meaningless as turns on a trapeze.

Belief in the Communion of Saints, the Mystical Body of Christ, was the second living principle actuating Clare in her life of penance. She knew that, on the mysterious scales of Divine Justice, the penances of the Poor Ladies would avail for the impenitent in the world, that their purity would weigh against the impurity of others. A return to the humble paths of Clare, who was "purer than light," could rekindle the blaze of youth in modern hard young faces, could release incredible vials of fragrance down the odorous streets of our stale age.

It is the nature of goodness to diffuse itself quietly. It is the nature of evil to defend itself, and most often noisily. We have called Clare of Assisi the candle in Umbria, because that seemed the truest symbol of her life and of her soul. She who was brave against the dark as candleflame is brave, pure in her flicker of life as candlelight is pure, was also quiet in her sanctity as the constant candle is quiet in giving up all that makes it a candle. The real office of a candle is to cease to be a candle. And the basic business of one aspiring to perfection is to become Someone Else. It is an extremely difficult business, for one does get so attached even to the unpleasant person one is!

It has been said that the predominant evil of any age ultimately manages to scale cloister walls. If the world has found that a constant racket will, in time, fill in its thought chambers and outcry its consience, religious need likewise to be careful that they do not camouflage a great lack of being with a great deal of doing. The hero of the hour is the one who can do the most things in the shortest possible time, but such a one may make a sorry religious.

In her century, when abbesses were more often than not womenof affairs with huge temporal holdings and immense households, enjoying the prestige of worldly queens, Clare quietly shut herself up in dilapidated old San Damiano. And, at once, it was a monastery. Not

because it was grand or picturesque or thriving, but because it was a house of prayer and a haven of silence, where souls devoted themselves to the most intense of all activities: passivity. Most of the first Poor Ladies were noblewomen; one was a princess royal. To all of them, Clare offered nothing in substitute for the trumpeting and adulation they had known in the world, except prayer and solitude and poverty. She herself has left us not even one colorful statement on the political character of her times. And if some Popes have sought temporal counsel from certain saints, three Popes sought at San Damiano the spiritual counsel of one whose only concern with the world was for its soul, a concern of quiet prayer and self-immolation. When the aged Innocent IV found himself prostrated by temporal tragedies as well as by spiritual anguish, he came to his "daughter and mother, the Lady Clare," not for a plan of action, but to renew his own soul in the quiet of her holiness. It has never been claimed that Francis asked Clare what to do about recalcitrants or schismatics; it is known that he found his own answers in her serene loyalty.

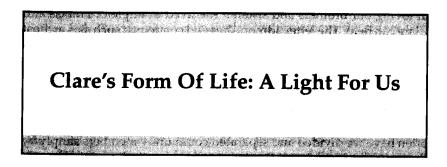
We learn nowhere so quickly and yet so profoundly as we learn in quiet. Because the world cannot bear to learn about itself or to look in on its own wizened soul, it fears and hates quiet. It hustles, because it cannot afford to think. It rivets and blares because it dare not be still. Ours is an age of accomplishment, but one draws in the breath to think of what real and lasting accomplishments could spring out of a return to the silence of contemplation. The very word, contemplation, ought to be the most companionable of words for any soul, since it is the term of our eternal destiny. Yet most persons are ill at ease with it. Action and noise are less demanding companions. By modern standards, Clare of Assisi's life was wasted. She built no hospitals, introduced no system of pedagogy, made no speeches, wrote no books, did not even proclaim a new way of sanctity. The Gospel was her way. Francis was her guide. And her destiny was the quiet of utter union with God her Lover

Clare had a taste for solitude and a talent for quiet. By indulging the one and perfecting the other, she learned the very secrets of God and gained open sesame to God's heart. Her first spiritual daughters have told us of their Mother's increasing hunger for hours of companionship with her Divine Spouse in the quiet of private prayer. The Poor Clares' prayer schedule would probably seem staggering to most persons. For Clare, it was never sufficient. When her daughters slept, Clare remained before the Blessed Sacrament, lost in the quiet of her perfect union with God. How many times her daughters saw flames or rings of light about her head when she knelt in quiet prayer, oblivious of

earth! Her quiet, "useless" life brought her to such intimacy with Christ that when dying she could say to him with a sweet simplicity that brings tears to our own eyes: "I thank you for having created me." Hers was the true courtesy of Francis. One is reminded of Mother Janet Stuart of our own times who died, not with a protest of *her* love for God on her lips, but with a Franciscan cry of simple wonder: "Oh, how He loves me!" In the simple song that was Clare's life, the ictus was always on God.

Clare is the saint of silence. She has left us no autobiography, no guidebooks, no "accomplishments." Like Mary herself, she left us the legacy of her quiet. We need it so acutely, we poor, noisy, busy little people. Her courage, her blazing purity, her perfect quiet are her claims to twentieth century veneration. Her valor sweetly rebukes our pusillanimity; her exquisite purity pleads for our stale generation; the great, missionary heart that beat for all the world in the silence of her cloister sends its throb across seven centuries to us now. If we look for light in these dark days, let us hear Francis's simple directive, uttered over and over again to sufferers of his own age and confided to our age from Heaven: "Go to the Lady Clare."

The Cord, 45.4 (1995)



Jude M. Rochford, OFM Conv.

Did you ever receive an unexpected letter? Some days ago I received such a letter. It was addressed to the Poor Clares and others who love Francis and Clare. The letter, "Clare of Assisi, the New Woman," was written by the Ministers General of the Franciscan family on the occasion of the 800th anniversary of the birth of St. Clare (1193-1993). It has since reaffirmed my form of life. This letter could touch your life. Let me explain more completely the precious treasure I found.

Can a Franciscan friar have a cherished, brotherly relationship to Clare, a cloistered woman of the 13th century? How can this letter refresh and transform our way of living? Questions such as these may be yours too!

For those in the Franciscan way of life this letter can be a source of encouragement to continue the journey begun on profession day. For anyone who loves Clare it gives strong medicinal remedies for spiritual aching muscles and deep wounds. It uplifts the healthy, athletic Christian to continue the fight against evil.

Repeated again and again in this letter are six refrains which help us re-examine our religious lives. They are: charity, the spirit and letter of the law, work, self-development, poverty versus materialism, and contemplation. It is in these noble virtues that Clare excelled.

Charity

The theological virtue of charity (Co1 3:14) is to be practiced not only by talking about it but by gracious acts of love. We are to love as God loves, ourselves and all God's creatures. In what ways do we fail in loving our brothers and sisters? The lived example of Francis and Clare can help. The letter admonishes and condemns such sins against charity as murmuring, detraction and calumny, which are caused by envy and vainglory. These acts are "odious" to God. They are wounds inflicted on the Spirit of the Lord and mutual charity. Francis said they are the ruin of the Order (Adm 14).

The Ministers General say that these offences against charity are found in our communities. They cause many sad experiences. How often have we divided and separated community members simply by deliberate reciprocal negative judgements about others. We often do this by insinuations and misunderstandings about matters that are in themselves unimportant. We exaggerate and "make mountains out of molehills."

The Spirit of the Lord should make us fully alive. In our loving obedience to the ever merciful God as found in the bountiful act of creation, we assist God in rebuilding the Church. By petty fault-finding we remove the mortar and stones of God's edifice. Working toward unity in a variety of ways in interpersonal relationships enriches our Christian, evangelical way of life. Francis and Clare emphasize mutual charity again and again. They remind us that we should follow the example of Christ and his mother Mary.

Spirit and Letter of the Law

Today, as in the past, there continues to be much questioning and dialogue, within the Franciscan Order and the Church, about the meaning and application of the words, "spirit and letter of the law." Consideration of these words moves us to determine what is primary and what is secondary in our unique, Christian, evangelical form of life. The interpretation of spirit and letter can either help or obstruct fidelity to our vowed life.

Clare, in her interpretation of "spirit and letter of the law," insisted on total fidelity to Christ and Mary. This was her only concern—unity in the bond of love lived in the service of her espoused Lover.

In her Letter to Ermentrude of Bruges she writes:

Love God and Jesus, His Son, who was crucified for us sinners. . . Do not be afraid. . . . Pray to God for one another, for by carrying

each other's burden of charity in this way we will easily fulfill the law of Christ (LEr 4-17).

Clare did this in the enclosure—in silence, in prayer, in poverty and in unity with the sisters. Such love was healthy and respected a holy pluriformity in the context of a consensual model of living together. It dealt with interpersonal relationships among the sisters, with the community and with the Church's leaders. It held no esteem for privileges and particular human friendships.

Clare discerned the priorities in her life and distinguished the primary from the secondary. Following Christ via the way of Francis, who was her comforter in body and soul and who established her in God's grace, she held in highest esteem the charity, the spirit of prayer, the privilege of poverty, the Spirit of the Lord and unity in human love. Of less importance for her were names and titles, which she accepted only as permissible and useful.

It seems entirely foreign to the spirit of Clare to engage in controversial discussion over matters undefined in the Rule or in the doctrinal life of the Church, be they spiritual or literal interpretations. She always urged a spirit of unity and charity, as opposed to dissension and division. For her, "mutual love is the bond of perfection" (RCl 10: 7).

A spirit of peace resulted from Clare's sharing of responsibility and insisting on the participation of even the least one within the community. She remained faithful to God, to the Church, to Francis, to her sisters and to all creatures.

Clare's trust in God's goodness and in other human beings confronts us with the need to reexamine our own attitudes toward faithfulness to the Word of God and the word of the Franciscan Rule. Conscientiously reflecting on the Gospels, we allow the life of Jesus to be made more vibrant in our own lives. Our daily recitation of the psalms, private prayer and meditation, our compassion and willingness to forgive others help us realize that fidelity to God and the Church embraces everyone—yes even our enemies, "those who trespass against us."

Work

What is our attitude towards work: manual, spiritual or educational? According to the Ministers' letter, work is essential to our religious lives. Work, according to Francis and Clare, is a special and beautiful grace of the Lord. Idleness is an enemy of the soul. Work, however, must never extinguish the spirit of prayer and devotion, but

strengthen it. It is the Spirit of the Lord that gives life to every good work. Any human activity, if not inspired by the Spirit of the Lord, risks degenerating into self-love (cf. Adm 6, 14). Clare served at the feet of everyone in the monastery enclosure. She served the poor and the sick with the greatest charity and humility in imitation of the Word Incarnate.

Self-development

Our hearts grow within our own bodily "enclosures." Personal development takes place. Faith matures. Grace draws us out of darkness. For this we need within us silence, solitude, space and penitential practices. We need to live our lives intensely and intimately with the Lord within our corporeal enclosures. It is neither Christian nor Franciscan for us to allow our hearts to remain outside where charity and the Spirit of the Lord are neither valued nor fostered, while our bodies remain inside an enclosure, sheltered by the letter of the law. This leads to a hypocritical, pharisaical double life.

Poverty

The letter emphasizes, too, that we need to avoid secular materialism and paternalism. What should be stressed is the Spirit of the Lord and of Mary. Our models are Jesus Himself, the poor and humble Christ, and Mary, who is "virgin made Church."

Contemplation

Clare's contemplative life, especially her desire for holiness, is within reach of our own spiritual vision. It was within her nature to respond to God's grace. Nature and grace formed a unity within her life as grace builds on and perfects nature.

Clare had a strong spirit, both as a child and as a woman. She was decisive, resourceful and reserved. She did not seek admiration nor marriage, since she had espoused herself to the Lord. As a girl she fed the needy from food taken from her own plate. She wore rough and cheap garments. Penitence was part and partial of her life. She was drawn by the example of Francis and just as enamored of Christ as he was. She fell in love with the divine Spouse, who became the Way for her as he was for Francis.

Her love for Christ was as intense as the burning flames of a new Pentecost. She found that, in love, any suffering or trial could be endured. Like Francis she became a "lover and imitator" of the Lord. This love made her trials and sufferings a joy. As Christian and religious, we, too, can take Clare of Assisi as an example when trials and tribulations come.

A Model for All

The letter of the Ministers General and its message is not just for the Poor Clares, but for all of us who belong to the Franciscan family and for all God's people. Together we look forward to a universal, cosmic community, freed from all calumny, envy, hatred, jealousy, murmuring, prejudice, self-assertion and unfriendliness—a big moral and political challenge in the world today and, with God's help, attainable.

Clare and Francis. Francis and Clare. One cannot be without the other. Pope John Paul II, visiting the monastery of St. Clare in Assisi in 1982, said that there is a deep union between Francis and Clare, understood in faith only by a Christian, Franciscan and evangelical spirituality. We cannot use human criteria for an explanation. Francis espouses Christ and, in his sister Clare, he finds the image of the most perfect spouse of Christ, Mary the most holy.

Francis was a man of evangelical peace. Clare was a woman of contemplative prayer. One complements the other. Francis called her a Christian lady, rather than using her name, Clare, recognizing how completely she lived the Gospel life. In 1986, Pope John Paul II, at a Day of Prayer in Assisi, recommended that all men and women read the writings of Francis and Clare and imitate their lives in order that the whole world might live in universal peace, justice and charity.

Can we, as Christians and Franciscans, do less?

Clare and Intimacy with the Lord

Madge Karecki, SSJ-TOSF

Over the past few years a number of books and articles have been written about Clare and her writings, but it is her writings themselves which continually hold my attention because her whole preoccupation was the Lord. Her biography, too, provides insights into her relationship with the Lord. She was absorbed in the person of her Beloved Lord Jesus. In her biography we read that even as a child she was taken up with prayer. The author of that text wrote: "She held the pursuit of holy prayer as a friend" (CL 4).

What an unusual expression! Clare's biographer is saying that just as we hold on to our friends to help us through life, Clare clung to holy prayer as a friend, as a way to Christ. Perhaps Clare's biographer had in mind this text from Ecclesiasticus 9:10: "Do not desert an old friend; the new one will not be his match. New friend, new wine; when it grows old, you drink it with pleasure." He applied it to her. At any rate, we know that prayer was an important part of her life, because it was in prayer that she was able to express directly her love for Christ, her Beloved One. Prayer was for her a friend, a friend of hers and of the Bridegroom, Christ the Lord.

Still another passage from her biography speaks of the work of the Spirit in her heart:

When she began to feel the first stirrings of holy love, she judged that the passing scene of worldly pride should be con-

demned, being taught by the unction of the Spirit to place a worthless price upon worthless things (CL 4).

This text is important because it gives us very succinctly the motivation for her choice of poverty. She placed "a worthless price upon worthless things." Like St. Paul, once Clare met Christ, everything else counted for nothing. She wanted nothing to get in the way of her freedom to love. Her biographer tells us that this happened early in her life, even before she met Francis. This accounts for the generosity out of which she shared food and other things with poor people. It is a fact that is also attested to by some of the witnesses in the testimonies for her canonization. Then there is the phrase "unction of the Spirit." She was taught to value things according to the inspiration of the Spirit, from the perspective of faith.

Her biographer tells us that after settling at San Damiano:

She had already focused the most fervent attention of her entire desire on the Light and she opened more generously the depths of her mind to the torrents of grace that bathe a world of turbulent change (CL 19).

We know that, after Clare joined the friars, Francis took her to the monastery of San Paolo and then to the community of Beguines at Sant' Angelo in Panzo. Neither of these places, though, provided what Clare was looking for, namely to keep focused on the Light. They were too well-provided-for, too secure. San Paolo was in a lovely setting with woodlands and streams and a variety of flowers. This monastery was endowed with papal privileges and severe penalties were issued to anyone who tried to interfere with their life. Sant' Angelo, located on the slopes of Mount Subasio, was also prominent in the Spoleto valley, but its setting was dry and desolate, hard and rocky. Clare was not at peace at either place. She wanted a place where the Light could illumine her more fully so she could reflect that light more clearly. She was not able to settle just anywhere; the place had to be right. The place where she was able to focus was indeed San Damiano; poor, small, near the city, accessible to the people.

Further on in Clare's biography we are told also that she spent long periods of time in prayer.

After the others went to their hard beds to rest their tired bodies, she remained in prayer, thoroughly vigilant and invincible, so that she could then secretly receive the divine whispers (Job 4: 12) while sleep occupied the others (CL 19).

This text reminds us of Celano's account of Francis's long hours of

prayer. Francis and Clare's prayer was *prayer of long duration*.

Another text tells us the posture she assumed while at prayer:

Very frequently while she was prostrate on her face in prayer, she flooded the ground with tears and caressed it with kisses, so that she might always seem to have her Jesus in her hands, on whose feet her tears flowed and her kisses were impressed (CL 19).

We need to give special notice to the expression "her Jesus." It suggests the kind of intimacy that was characteristic of her relationship with the Lord. What a marvelous phrase: "her Jesus." While aware that the Lord wants to be known and loved by all, she was profoundly aware that Jesus loved her personally and deeply. She was in love with Christ and she belonged to him and He to her.

Perhaps more than any source, her *Letters to Agnes of Prague* reveal the depth of the intimacy she shared with Christ, her Jesus. Those of us who try to take spiritual development seriously understand the importance of spiritual direction. We also realize that directors direct out of their own experience, and the more attuned they are to the ways of God the more they can help to guide others. From Clare's letters to Agnes we are able to get a glimpse of her relationship with the Lord and see that it was indeed the center of her life.

In the first *Letter to Agnes* Clare gave a description of Christ as she knew Him through prayer:

Whose power is stronger,
Whose generosity more abundant,
Whose appearance more beautiful, whose love more tender,
Whose courtesy more gracious.

In Whose embrace You are already caught up; Who has adorned Your breast with precious stones and has placed priceless pearls on Your ears and has surrounded You with sparkling gems as though blossoms of springtime and placed on Your head a golden crown as a sign of your holiness (1LAg 9-11).

Clare's description of Christ is mystical and ecstatic. She wrote to Agnes out of the abundance of her heart where she had experienced the love of Christ very personally. She is entirely caught up in him. Clare's language is similar to that of the Song of Songs. We will find her using texts from this piece of Wisdom Literature throughout her

letters. She also paints this picture of Christ in contrast to the other suitors which she knew Agnes could have had. None of them could compare with Christ.

In the third *Letter*, after some advice about how to pray, Clare described for Agnes the experience of intimacy with the Lord. It is a passage that could have only come out of Clare's own prayer experience. She urged Agnes to be faithful to meditation upon the scriptures so that she might know Christ deeply. She put it this way:

So that you too may feel what His friends feel as they taste the hidden sweetness that God Himself has reserved from the beginning for those who love Him....

[That] you may totally love Him
Who gave Himself totally for your love,
Whose beauty the sun and the moon admire,
Whose rewards and their preciousness and greatness are without end;
I am speaking of Him
Who is the Son of the Most High,
Whom the Virgin brought to birth
and remained a virgin after His birth (3LAg 14-17).

Perhaps the most telling line is the one which says: "Who gave himself totally for your love." Knowing and experiencing Christ as the one who is totally lovable and who is always willing to give himself, Clare had been captivated by Christ and she was totally taken up with his person, totally devoted to Him because he had given himself to her so completely. We might ask ourselves if we are so moved by the totality of Christ's redeeming love for us. Are we captivated by his person? Are we willing to give of ourselves as completely as Clare urges? This is very hard, especially if we have been badly hurt by someone or betrayed, or if we do not feel loved for ourselves.

In the fourth *Letter* there is another description of Christ as the one "whose beauty all the blessed hosts of heaven unceasingly admire" (10). But this letter is known for its mirror theology in which Clare advised Agnes how to meditate on Christ in the scriptures. After this advice she concludes:

As you further contemplate His ineffable delights, eternal riches and honors, and sigh for them in the great desire and love of your heart, may you cry out:

Draw me after you,

we will run in the fragrance of your perfumes, O heavenly Spouse! I will run and not tire, until You bring me into the wine-cellar, until Your left hand is under my head and Your right hand will embrace me happily, and You will kiss me with the happiest kiss of Your mouth (4LAg 28-32).

Here Clare is at her best, totally taken up with Christ. She stressed what was necessary on Agnes's part if she was to be transformed by the love of Christ: desire and love. Love always seeks love; that's why Francis lamented that "Love is not loved!" Clare taught that only when we are willing to love Christ totally will the love be given. The more one loves, the greater his or her capacity to love becomes. But there has to be within us a great desire to love as Jesus loves. We have to allow ourselves to fall in love with the person of Christ. This is a major theme in the writings and life of Clare. It holds everything else together and creates a context for her form of life.

Clare responded to an initial grace given to her by divine inspiration; her response opened her to love and a to growing desire to be like her Beloved Lord, her Jesus. Each of us in the Franciscan family has also been called by divine inspiration. Clare is for us a "wisdom figure," who has provided us with sure guidance for the journey within which we can find "our Jesus" and be transformed into his likeness.

Endnote

The Cord, 45.4 (1995)

Spiritual Direction

of a Contemplative According to the

Meditations on the Life of Christ
and
Clare's Letters to Agnes of Prague

Pacelli Millane, OSC

Clearly the twelfth and thirteenth centuries witnessed a shift in spirituality. The Cistercians brought into new focus the affective dimension of the spiritual journey, and the Franciscans opened the way for emphasis on the humanity of Christ. A text such as the *Meditations on the Life of Christ* gives evidence of this new emphasis in the spiritual life.

According to scholars today, the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, an illustrated manuscript of the 14th century, was written by a Franciscan Friar for a Poor Clare. Francis and Clare are mentioned twice in this work. However, there is little clear evidence in the text that the author knows the spirituality of Clare through her own writings. He never quotes Clare at all. There are, however, interesting references to Cecilia, in which he describes her way of meditating on the Scripture "with pure and undivided heart and single-minded and fervent intent" (MLC 1).

This paper will focus on the manner of spiritual direction in the Meditations and in the four Letters of St. Clare to Agnes of Prague. By

¹ Originally presented at the Annual Franciscan Convention in South Africa, September, 1994. All quotations from the *Legend of Clare* and the *Letters of Clare* are taken from *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, ed. and trans. Regis J. Armstrong, OFM, Cap. (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 1993).

"spiritual direction" here, we mean a process of walking with another person through the active pursuit of virtues and the movement of contemplation towards union with God. The *Letters* stretch over a period of time beginning when Agnes entered the monastery (1234) until Clare's death (1253). Although we do not have any of the letters written by Agnes to Clare or a response of the Poor Clare to the Franciscan Friar in the *Meditations*, there is, nevertheless, much that we can glean from these texts in regard to the journey of prayer.

I will try to point out some similarities and differences between these two texts regarding the active pursuit of virtue and the passive movement towards mystical union, in order to accent two important moments in directing another person within the contemplative or Poor Clare tradition. The great volume of quotes from St. Bernard in the *Meditations* raises the question as to whether this Poor Clare is being directed within the Franciscan tradition of the Second Order or in a Cistercian tradition.²

Spiritual Direction in the Meditations on the Life of Christ

The author's manner of meditation is that of a storyteller as he allows his own mind and heart to reflect on the life of Christ from the Gospels. He presents these meditations to the Poor Clare as a way of entering more deeply into the life of Christ. They are unique and creative and would nourish her own creative imagination. He tells her that when she finds the phrases, "This was said and done by the Lord Jesus," it is to be read, "Suppose that this is what the Lord Jesus said and did." Clearly these meditations move beyond the Gospel texts, but "they might have occurred according to the devout belief of the imagination." He goes on to say that these are written in such a manner "as not to contradict the truth of life and justice and not to oppose faith and morality." These various meditations are written to bring her into devout contemplation on the humanity of Christ and should not be taken in the literal sense. Intermingled in the text are a number of references to the virtues and invitations for incorporation of these virtues into her life.

Not only does he outline these meditations for her, but he gives her a glimpse of the vision of God to which she is called. He is an excellent director in the sense that he gives her very practical steps to take here and now as a beginner in contemplation and then creates in the text a progression of the spiritual journey including the final vision of God. In order to persevere lovingly in daily meditation, it is important for her to have an understanding of the magnitude of God's love

and to desire a deeper relationship with Him.

He gives her an understanding of the classical movement of contemplation through the use of the Martha/Mary image, which is so strong in the Christian tradition.³ He does this within the Gospel story and prepares her for watching and waiting upon the Lord, urging her to see how these women disciples gently served Jesus (MLC 245-46).

Next he gives her a treatise on the active and contemplative life through the writings of Blessed Bernard, assuring her that this is most useful and necessary for her to know. This part of the text is clearly much more Cistercian by the simple fact that each point is supported with quotes taken directly from Bernard's Sermons on the Song of Songs, but it is valuable to a contemplative of any tradition (MLC 245-90). After he has painted for her the panorama of the whole spiritual journey towards union with God, he returns to the meditation on the life of Christ. This time the meditations move toward the suffering of Jesus in his ministry and some miracles, but it is clearly oriented towards the Passion of Christ (MLC 302-58). This is followed by meditations on the resurrection (MLC 359-74), the ascension of the Lord (MLC 374-84), the mission of the Holy Spirit and the desire for the fullness of eternity (MLC 384-87).

Lastly, he gives her very practical advice about how she is to divide these meditations into a one week period: Monday, the flight of the Lord into Egypt; Tuesday, the opening of the Book in the Synagogue; Wednesday, the ministry of Mary and Martha; Thursday, the Passion; Friday and Saturday, the Resurrection; Sunday, the Resurrection to the end (MLC 387-88). This is to be repeated each week in order that she familiarize herself with the texts and that she begin to speak freely with the Lord Jesus as well as carry the texts within her heart. This is to inflame her desires for the Lord.

Spiritual Direction Given by Clare of Assisi

The four Letters of Saint Clare of Assisi to Agnes of Prague, written over a span of approximately twenty years, give direction to a noble lady in her endeavor to follow a mode of religious life similar to the Poor Ladies of San Damiano.

The introductory part of the first *Letter* indicates that Clare is speaking to a mature woman who has just made a clear choice to follow the Lord Jesus Christ by dispossessing herself of all material possessions and honors (1LAg 5-6). In many ways this letter is about the exchange that Agnes has made by choosing the Lord Jesus. Clare describes the qualities of Agnes's new Spouse in contrast to the worldly spouse whom

she could have married. This Spouse has "stronger power, more abundant generosity, a more beautiful appearance, more tender love, and more gracious courtesy" (1LAg 9). Clare focuses likewise on the exchange of goods. Agnes has chosen to "leave the things of time for those of eternity" and "a blessed life" (1 LAg 30). Clare gives her the praises of poverty (1LAg 15-17) and through the use of various scripture texts exhorts her to move "from virtue to virtue" (1LAg 32). Clare is clearly emphasizing poverty, understanding that many of the other ordinary virtues are already in place in Agnes's life.

The second *Letter* seems to be much more one of encouragement and acknowledgment of the virtue that is already present in Agnes. The emphasis is on "living always" in this mode of life as a poor virgin (2LAg 2, 18). Thus Clare begins to lead her into deeper contemplation through the desire to imitate Christ. She exhorts her to "gaze upon, consider, contemplate as you desire to imitate" (2LAg 20). She orients Agnes to focus more completely on the life of Jesus in His suffering, and she couples this with the rewards that will follow: "You shall share always and forever the glory of the kingdom of heaven in place of earthly and passing things" (2LAg 23).

In the third *Letter*, Clare notes that Agnes has overcome pride and vanity and that she has reached out to the "hidden treasure" of the Gospel through "humility, the virtue of faith and the strong arms of poverty" (3LAg 7). She directs her to begin to turn her entire being, "mind, soul, and heart," towards transformation "into the image of the Godhead Itself through contemplation" (3LAg 12-13). Clare brings in the example of Mary and seems to be leading Agnes into deeper humility, faith and love.

The fourth *Letter* invites Agnes into a deeper relationship with and desire for the Lord. Clare exalts the virtues of poverty and humility, but not so much in the prosaic sense of the active endeavor to incorporate them into one's life. Rather she sees their place in the life of Jesus and how they lead one deeper into identification with Jesus. It is the movement into the ineffable love of God. Clare invites Agnes to enkindle this great desire through sighs and cries that are written in the language of the *Song Of Songs* (4LAg 30-32).

This is clearly about transformation. It is the time of deep, intense desire and the inflaming of charity. Note the profound understanding of the poverty and humility of Jesus (4LAg 20-23), which could only be attained by one who had incorporated these virtues into her own life and who was in deep communion with the incarnation and passion of Jesus in her inner soul.

Comparison between the Meditations and the Letters of Clare

The *Meditation on the Life of Christ* and the *Letters to Agnes* differ both in life situations and in modes of spiritual direction.⁴ Agnes appears to have had considerable spiritual experience by the time Clare wrote to her; in fact, she had become the abbess of a monastery.

The *Meditations*, on the other hand, were written for a person who had perhaps only begun to pray seriously with a contemplative type of meditation on the life of Christ. The director is teaching her to use her creative imagination and to become more fully conscious of her relationship to Christ through meditation. She seems to be at a neophyte stage of the spiritual life.

We will now examine two themes more closely: the virtues to be incorporated into one's life and the movement into the mystical life.

The Lord of Virtue

In the beginning of the *Meditations*, the director says that contemplation of the life of Christ does three things: fortifies and steadies the intellect against the trivial and transient; fortifies against trials and adversity; and teaches one to avoid enemies and vices which lead to deception and thus open one to the perfection of virtue. He points out that the most important source of examples and teachings about charity, poverty, humility, wisdom, prayer, meekness, obedience and patience is the life of the Lord (MLC Prologue). He goes on to note that it was by "conversation with and contemplation of his Lord Jesus that Francis would have attained such abundance of virtue" (MLC 3).

In his overall schema of the contemplative journey, the first part of the "active life," epitomized by Martha, has to do with the acquisition of virtue. "Everyone exercises himself and wearies himself in prayer and in the study of the holy writings and in the other good deeds and services in common conversation, rectifying vices and acquiring virtue" (MLC 246). There is need to acquire virtue, but always in relationship with the Lord.

Purity of Heart

Jesus goes into the desert to pray. The emphasis here moves toward virtue and strength in time of temptation. Through solitude, fasting, praying or watching, sleeping on the bare earth, humbly conversing with the beasts or corporal suffering, one is led to purity of heart. Purity of heart includes charity, humility, patience and all virtues, as well as the removal of vice, which can destroy prayer. Prayer after overeating results in softness and laziness and is worth little. Prayer requires fasting and corporal affliction coupled with discretion. Within the temptations of Jesus, one discovers the humility, benignity and patience of Jesus. The director adds a very touching account of Jesus' love for His Mother. According to the *Meditations* the angels asked Jesus what he would like to eat after fasting so long. Jesus replies, "Go to my beloved mother. If she has something at hand, let her send it, for I eat no food as gladly as hers" (MLC 125). The author uses this story to show the humility of Jesus, who gives food to others, but must also acknowledge his own need of physical food. In the *Meditations* one is always oriented to see the life of Jesus as a model for one's own.

Poverty

In the meditation on the sermon preached to the disciples on Mt. Tabor, the director does an exposition of the Beatitudes. He points out how the Lord "instructed the disciples on the Beatitudes, prayer, fasting, almsgiving and many other things belonging to virtue." In this meditation is a treatise on poverty. "Poverty is the prime foundation of all spiritual exercise" (MLC 152). There are many quotes in this chapter from Bernard and from the Gospel, but, interestingly enough, neither Francis nor Clare is mentioned.

The director gives another summons to poverty in the meditation on the disciples taking the ears of corn when they were hungry. After noting Jesus' poverty, he gives practical advice about the life of the Poor Clare in the monastery. He points out that poverty is rooted and established in the heart and that virtue is to be in the soul and not simply affecting the exterior of our person. If not rooted deeply, it leaves room for cupidity, concupiscence and other desires (MLC 233-45). Poverty from necessity produces shame and contempt, but voluntary poverty, embraced for the love of God, is virtuous and honorable.

The author again makes no reference to Francis or Clare as models of poverty, nor gives any examples from their lives as lovers of poverty. He continues to quote Bernard, using the same text to exhort against gluttony. John the Baptist, Francis and Clare are here shown to have served "abstinence rigorously." Bernard indicates that abstinence should be moderated in some cases. It does not seem that the director has access to the Rule of Clare (RCl 3:7-10), which expresses quite simply the practice of fasting with discretion. The third *Letter* clearly states, "I beg you . . . to refrain wisely and prudently from an indiscreet and impossible austerity in the fasting that you have undertaken" (3LAg 40).

Poverty and humility are coupled in the incarnation (MLC IV-XI).

The director exhorts the Poor Clare to "look at the face of Jesus" and to look at the disciples "as they gaze on Him with reverence, humility and all intentness of mind, listening to those marvelous words and committing them to memory" (MLC 154). This idea of gazing on the Lord as into a "mirror" is important in the *Letters* of Clare (2LAg 20, 3LAg 19-23).

Other Virtues

There are many other examples of virtues woven within this text of meditations. Chapter XVI is a beautiful text on humility taught within the journey of Jesus to His Baptism. All of these meditations follow a similar pattern: giving a concrete event in the life of Jesus, expanding it through creative imagination and meditation and then drawing attention to the various virtues involved. The director teaches this Poor Clare to pray for these virtues, that they might be incorporated in her life.

We see the contrast in Clare's Letters where she is much more affirming of the virtue already present in Agnes's life. In the first Letter, she gives Agnes the hymn of "poverty," which is one of the most important virtues to be incorporated into one's life. Clare uses Scripture quotes to strengthen her praise of poverty and to encourage Agnes to continue making an exchange of the things of time for those of eternity.

In the second *Letter*, Clare urges Agnes to go forward securely, joyfully and swiftly on this path in pursuit of the perfection to which the Lord has called her (2LAg 12). Clare is orienting Agnes to gaze on Jesus, contemplate Him and desire to imitate Him. Just as in the Meditations we saw the young sister being directed toward focusing on the life of Jesus so that she might actively work to acquire the various virtues, so in Clare's *Letters* we see Agnes being directed to focus more clearly on the Lord. The third and fourth *Letters* encourage Agnes to turn her full attention to the Mirror which is Christ and call her to be attentive to the reality of His incarnation, passion and death. She is being drawn more and more into an attentive, passive stance before the mysteries of God. Reading these *Letters*, we feel the progression of love.

Agnes is at a much deeper point in her spiritual life, and there is no need for creative storytelling to direct her life to Jesus, no need for enumerating virtues for incorporation into her life, because this has already taken place. Agnes is already advanced in the spiritual life, which Clare recognizes by a special gift of wisdom (3LAg 6). Clare knows through this gift how to direct Agnes to enkindle deeper desire

and to long for the Lord with the passion of a lover.

The *Meditations* taught the young sister the way of virtue through daily meditation on the life of Christ. At the same time, the director saw the need to direct her attention to two other kinds of contemplation which would be necessary to bring her into deep unitive intimacy with God. He was careful, also, to point out some of the obstacles that could cause problems.

Clare's *Letters*, on the other hand, are addressed to a woman who is already steeped in virtue, and Clare reinforces poverty because it is so essential to her understanding of the life of Jesus. Her mode of direction is clearly focused and to the point. Clare invites Agnes to place her attention unreservedly and without words on the mysteries of the Lord. She tells her to allow herself to be transformed through loving attentiveness to the relationship between herself and God. Jesus, Himself, is the way for her into loving union with the Father.

Conclusion

We have looked at two different texts, each of which gives spiritual direction to a Poor Clare, one at a more advanced stage of spiritual development than the other. The Cistercian influence in the *Meditations* makes one wonder how much the life and writings of Francis and Clare were known by the author.

We have looked at purity of heart, which encompasses all the virtues, and at poverty, which was central for Clare. Even though Clare saw Agnes as a woman advanced in virtue, she saw the need to assist her in incorporating the virtue of poverty at a deeper level, because it is a fundamental internal attitude for a contemplative relationship with God.

These two different sources reflect the importance of recognizing the particular stage of growth in a person's spiritual journey. They reflect the need for the spiritual director to help the person image an encounter with the majestic and eternal God. Each text uniquely sets out to prepare the person to move steadfastly in this direction and to desire ever more fully to follow Jesus in His humanity. Most of all, both texts reflect the truth that it is Jesus, in and through His humanity, who leads us into the fullness of the glory and splendor of the eternal vision of the Trinity.

Endnotes

1Cf. Isa Ragusa and Rosalie B. Green, Meditations on the Life of Christ: An Illustrated Manuscript of the Fourteenth Century (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) 1, 2, 133, 388. Hereafter this reference will be noted as MLC. There is no other information about this woman other than that he lists her as St. Cecilia. However, in Endnote 1 on the Pictures, the translators refer to two very similar phrases in a manuscript legend of St. Cecilia in Florence. They suggest that the Poor Clare was probably named Cecilia, which one of the manuscripts seems to verify. It is the virtues of St. Cecilia that he is urging her to imitate.

²In 1296 two decrees were issued by Cardinal Protector Matteo Rossi putting the ministers under an obligation to give total assistance to the Poor Clares. In 1336, Pope Benedict XII, a Cistercian, issued Constitutions for the Sisters Minor, the Clarisses and the Damianites. According to Iriarte there was much Cistercian influence in all of these new decrees. Perhaps this explains the use of Bernard's authority in this text of the *Meditations*. These Poor Clares were probably following the Urbanist Rule and not that of Clare, because Colette's Reform, which restored Clare's Rule, was not approved until 1434 and confirmed by Pius II only in 1458. Cf. Lazario Iriarte de Aspurz, OFM Cap., *Franciscan History: The Three Orders of St. Francis of Assisi.*, trans. Patricia Ross (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983) 452-455.

³Cf. Paul-Marie Guillaume, "Rachel et Lia," *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité Ascétique et Mystique*, 1987 ed.

⁴We are encountering two different modes of spiritual direction here. One is a series of letters written to a person, whom she has never met personally, but with whom there is a very close identification of ideals. The second, which comes to us in book form, is written by a Franciscan friar to a Poor Clare or a Community of Poor Clares. Though it seems the former, there is no clear evidence.

Book Review

This Living Mirror: Reflections on Clare of Assisi. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995. 144 pages. Paper. \$10.95. By Sister Frances Teresa, OSC.

The past few years have seen an outpouring of writings about Clare of Assisi. The enthusiasm surrounding a "re-discovery" of this remarkable medieval woman has been strong and infectious. An aspect especially attractive for our times is the contemplative, even mystical, quality of her life. In her Testament, Clare cuts through the idea that contemplative, enclosed women should be hidden and obscure, invisible to the eyes of the world at large: "If we have lived according to this form of life, . . . we shall leave a noble example to others" (TestCl 6).

This book celebrates Clare's visibility as an example and a source of spiritual energy for us today. In a fine and readable style, Sister Frances Teresa, vicaress of the Poor Clares at Arundel, West Sussex, England, not only gives us a survey of Clare's life, but mines both the events of this life and Clare's writings to offer us an original and effective spiritual guide. In a classical "triple way" format, the author journeys with Clare through conversion, contrition and communion and invites us to do the same.

Part 1, "Conversion," translates for us the fundamental attitude required of any seriously religious person: "The process of conversion [penance] . . . begins in the moment when we first turn our mind and heart to God—and what is that but the simplest . . . definition of prayer?" (p. 1). The author portrays a young and inexperienced Clare who needed to pass through the suffering and uncertainty of the purifying process as she followed her call into the unknown. The romantic quality that characterized this time of Clare's life is refocused: "We tend to link the powerfully romantic aura about her life to her relationship with Francis, but this is a mistake. . . . It was God . . . who was the overwhelming passion of Clare's life. Francis was what her biographer calls him, a marriage broker!" (p. 15). But this passion of Clare's did not give her clarity in the beginning of her spiritual journey. As all beginners, she needed to wait and wonder, to trust unreservedly, to let go of control.

In Part 2, "Contrition," the author presents the "long, slow process" by which Clare gradually matured and came to understand ever more clearly the meaning of a life lived completely in, with and through Christ. In this process Clare comes to know Christ as the one crucified for the sake of others. This is the journey from passion to compassion, the holy work of the Spirit of God.

In Part 3, "Communion," we see Clare coming to the fulness of her own unique human life. "Clare gave herself so generously to this love that she was led into a fully restored humanity, characterised by balance and harmony. . . . All this was no easier for Clare than it is for us" (pp. 113-114). It is little statements like the latter which draw the reader into the message of this book. The author has a fine capacity to make one feel that what happened to Clare really mattered for her and for us. She convinces us that we have only to *look* and we will be able to see Clare. Seeing her we will be able to see ourselves more clearly and understand that her journey is our journey.

This refreshing book would be a helpful companion for a retreat or for daily spiritual reading, taken in small bits and digested appreciatively in the best tradition of *lectio divina*. It is well-written, a pleasure to read, catching one off guard frequently with original and creative insights. The author brings to her work the fine touch of a woman who has learned from a woman and who mirrors for others the holy workings of God's Spirit.

Elise Saggau, OSF The Franciscan Institute

About Our Contributors:

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Oil painting of St. Clare of Assisi



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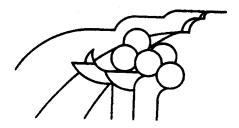
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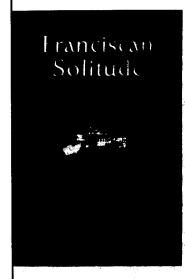
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