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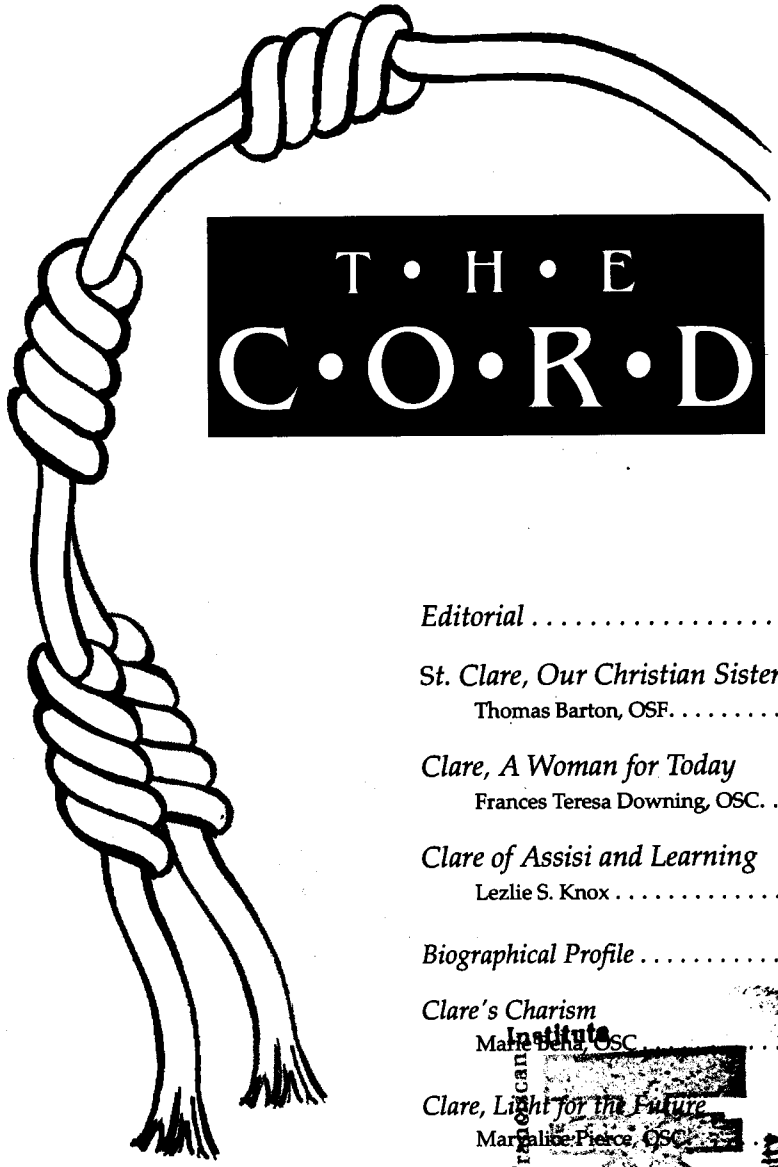

THE CORD

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THE CORD
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1. MSS should be submitted on disk or typed on 8 1/2 x 11 paper, one side only, double spaced.
2. The University of Chicago *Manual of Style*, 13 ed., is to be consulted on general questions of style.
3. Titles of books and periodicals should be italicized or, in typed manuscripts, underlined.
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   (1Cor. 13:6).
   (RegNB 23:2).
   (2Cel 5:8).
   (4LAg 2:13).

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Editorial

Again we devote our summer issue ot *The Cord* to writings about St. Clare of Assisi and her order. We begin with a short reflection by Brother Thomas Barton, OSF, on Clare as a Christian, a title which we rarely consider, perhaps because of the many sub-divisions which identify Christians of various denominations. But from that earliest time in Antioch, when the followers of Jesus were first called "Christians" (Acts 11:26), to our present time, the name is a clear mark of those who aspire to live like Jesus in the world. For Franciscans, who aim to follow the very footprints of Jesus Christ, this title has an enduring value—and in a world which longs for the Gospel of peace, being Christian offers a ministry of word and example that can lift the hearts of our brothers and sisters across all lines of race, of religion, of political or ethnic persuasion. This is the vision of Francis of Assisi, of Clare of Assisi, of all true Christian persons down through the ages.

Sister Frances Teresa, OSC, gives us a remarkable view of Clare as a woman for our own times—and some criteria for evaluating our own vocations as Franciscans today. Lezlie Knox provides an assessment of the intellectual life of Clare and her sisters and broadens our understanding of how enclosed, contemplative, poor women contribute to the intellectual content of the Church's life and thus enrich us all.

Sister Marie Beha, OSC, considers characteristic qualities of the apostolic and contemplative dimensions of the Franciscan way of life and demonstrates how different emphases contribute to issues of charism. Sister Maryalice Pierce, OSC, looks at Clare as a contemporary light for the Church and world.

We are happy, in this issue, to offer a biographical profile of Sister Marie Beha. This is the first in a series of such profiles that will introduce to our readers the members of T*he Cord's* editorial advisory board. We are grateful for the support and advice of these sisters and brothers who, in their love for our tradition, give of their time, talent, and thoughtful critique so that *The Cord* may continue to serve well our Franciscan family.

The Cord, 46, 4 (1996)

St. Clare, Our Christian Sister

Thomas Barton, OSF

A few weeks ago while looking over some issues of *The Cord*, a title of one article caught my eye: "How Radical was St. Clare?" That set me thinking about Clare and her response to life.

We know about Francis and his vocation. In the early stages, some people thought him mad, chased him, and even threw stones at him. Girls hid their faces when he walked down the street. His father, seeing the spectacle that his son had become, ran to bring him home. Was this at least in part to save him from further scorn and contempt?

Can we imagine the conversations of the Offeduccio household when Lord Rufino abandoned all to follow Jesus as a Franciscan? Rufino, one of the seven knights of the Offreduccio family, had decided to give it all away. Can you hear the chorus? Madness!

Very little is recorded about their reaction to Clare. There is, however, one direct incident and some direct responses. The family patriarch, Monaldo by name, having located Clare at the Benedictine Monastery of San Paolo, went quickly to bring her home. (Wisely Francis and Bishop Guido had requested shelter there. The previous year Innocent III had granted San Paolo the privilege of sanctuary.) When Clare heard Monaldo's voice she took herself immediately to the chapel. When he entered, his eyes beheld a nun whose head had been shaved, claiming the right to sanctuary by holding onto the altar cloths. Can we imagine his shock? Can we imagine what his immediate thoughts might have been? Surely madness passed through his mind.

What then of the direct responses? First, as a trickle, Agnes joined Clare. Then quickly, as if a dam had burst, the highest society gave its most eligible daughters to this new way of following Christ, as if they had been waiting many years for this one chance. Was this madness? Surely many thought so.

But to come back to the first question: How radical was St. Clare?

For a woman to leave her parental home, alone, at night, during the curfew, was conviction. To leave the shelter of the protection offered by the city was courageous. To go into the dark night through a swampy area, possibly infested by wild animals, bandits, and lepers was extremely brave. But was this radical?

The radicality of Clare's dicision came at St. Mary of the Angels. For the sake of Christ and her desire to imitate him, Clare became the first Franciscan woman at the same time that she forfeited her good name. What else do we truly have but our own good name, our own reputation?

Clare went to St. Mary of the Angels alone with all those men! Can you imagine the tale that was woven with that story? Surely madness is a part of that, but truly very much more must have been said. Clare herself indicated that was the case in her own Testament:

> When the blessed Francis saw, however, that although we were physically weak and frail, we did not shirk deprivation, poverty, hard work, trial, or the *shame or contempt of the world* (emphasis mine)—rather, we considered them as great delights, . . . he greatly rejoiced in the Lord (56).

The radical nature of Clare's vocation lies primarily in what she forfeited due to her association with Francis and the brothers. This decision had to work for Clare; it had to be her correct, one, true life choice. Why? The double standard operant in the Middle Ages gave women no margin for error. By her stepping out of the realm of Assisi's values and into the life of the Gospel, she closed forever one door, while walking though the door to eternity. The magnitude of that choice, the decision to join Francis and the Brothers, Clare consciously recalled in her encouragement to another seeker. In her first letter to Agnes of Prague, Clare exclaimed:

> What a great and praiseworthy exchange: to leave the things of time for those of eternity, to choose the things of heaven for the goods of the earth, to receive the hundred-fold in place of one and to possess a blessed and eternal life! (37)

To answer the initial question then of the radicality of St. Clare, let us look at the title Francis gave her—"our Christian Sister." That title, "Christian," Francis reserved for two—the leper and Clare. In both he found the person of Jesus in a very particular way. In the leper he found the wounded Jesus. In the Lady Clare he found one who had truly done what Jesus himself had done—emptied herself.

How radical was St. Clare? Radical enough that Francis identified her with Jesus.

The Cord, 46.4 (1996)

Clare of Assisi: A Woman for Today

Frances Teresa Downing, OSC

Introduction

While this article intends to reflect on Clare as a woman for today, it might be helpful to examine some of the principles behind this idea. It means a bit more work, but it will be time well-spent in helping us understand better both Clare and ourselves.

If you would forgive me for some dry stuff first, I would like to set out a sort of ground plan based on something which Bernard Lonergan, the Jesuit theologian, says about the Word in our lives and to use that as the framework within which to say what has occurred to me. Lonergan says that the Word, as it speaks to us, always has three dimensions. It is personal, it is social, and it is historical.

It is personal because it is spoken to a person, and it is always a word about love—God's love for me. This Word becomes a communication because of the inner response of the person addressed—because of the heart. Clare gives us an instance of this when she tells us in her Testament that the Lord enlightened her heart (TestCl 24).[1]

The Word is social because its meaning is only fully unfolded in relationship with others. It brings together what Lonergan calls "scattered sheep," which is what we always tend to become; and the only thing which effectively binds us together is the fact that, in the depths of our hearts, we all respond to the same mystery. We know this is true from our own experience of trying to build community. We recognize the things which do build community and how impossible it is to build community when these things are not present. It is out of our shared response that our shared life comes. "I," said Clare, "together with a few sisters whom the Lord had

given me after my conversion, willingly promised him [Francis] obedience" (TestCl 25).

Finally, the word is historical. Its meaning has had a specific historical expression—there was a time *when*.... The teaching which the Word gives is historical because the Word used words of everyday life from one era (in our case, the thirteenth century) to speak to us now, in the twentieth and nearly the twenty-first century, of an experience of love and awe which is for life now. Further, it has to do, says Lonergan rather unexpectedly, with common sense.[2]

This word spoken for history would be what Clare meant when she said in her Testament:

> The Lord himself has placed us not only as a form for others in being an example and mirror, but even for our sisters whom the Lord has called to our way of life as well, that they in turn might be a mirror and example to those living in the world (TestCl 19-20).

The *Legend of Saint Clare*, in the same sense, calls Clare "a brilliant light for women" (Preface) and Pope Alexander IV says that she was a sister and companion to the faithful (*Bull of Canonization* 19).

We will consider each of these three dimensions: the personal, as Clare and her charism; the social, as the Order and its charism; the historical, as us and our charism. We will then explore how these fit together and are parts of a whole. In this way we can begin to perceive how Clare can be, after 800 years, a woman for today.

The Word is Personal

We know what an important place the Word of God held in Francis's life. This was not just a vague love of Scripture, but an immediate interaction with God. God spoke to Francis and changed his life. Francis is in a direct line with all those people in the Scriptures who say things like: I saw the Lord and he said this to me. Francis understood that he was the little poor man to whom God had spoken. He himself tells us: "No one showed me what I should do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the form of the Holy Gospel" (Test 14).[3]

We find something similar in Clare. She was first moved when she heard the Word of God spoken by Francis in San Rufino Cathedral. She tells us:

> After the Most High Heavenly Father saw fit by His grace to enlighten my heart to do penance according to the example and teach-

ing of our most blessed Father, Saint Francis, I, together with my sisters, willingly promised him obedience (RCl 6:1).

This was what the Word said to her; this was her call, her vocation; and the action which followed was the free promise of obedience to Francis. Through that obedience, she was led to share Francis's own insight into the mystery of the Incarnation. They were both tutored by Mary, whom they saw as the paradigm of Christian living, the one who heard the Word of God and kept it so totally that the Word itself received flesh from her.

Clare's Own Charism

Let us now think about the gift, the charism, given to Clare herself. In our admiration for Clare we must not forget that all these things were given to her for us, the people of God. We can consider this under two headings. The *Legend of Clare* says:

> Let the men follow the new male disciples of the Incarnate Word [and] the women imitate Clare, the footprint of the Mother of God, a new leader of women (CL Preface).

Under these two titles, footprint of the Mother of God and new leader of women, we are provided with a neat way of thinking about Clare which matches Lonergan's three divisions without any contrivance. The first enables us to look a little into Clare's own heart, and the second helps us reflect on her in community.

Footprint of the Mother of God

We can see from Clare's letters that she was a very reflective person. Whatever she read or heard about God, she took into herself and meditated on, pondering it in her heart as Mary did, and learning from Mary to "do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5). By naming her the footprint of Mary, the author is making a statement about the way in which the Incarnation was at the heart of her life in God. The writings of some mystics can fairly easily be translated across denominational boundaries, but there is no way Clare could have written her letters except as a deeply committed Christian. A Sufi or Hasidic Clare is not easy to imagine, unlike the way in which the *Cloud of Unknowing*, for instance, can be read by people from all sorts of religious backgrounds.

Clare understood her call as an invitation to learn from Mary to be at the heart of the Christian mystery. Mary embodied the designs of God in the most literal way:

> [She] gave birth to a Son whom the heavens could not contain, and yet she carried Him in the little enclosure of her holy womb and held Him on her virginal lap (3LAg 18-19).

Clare learned from Mary to do "whatever he tells you." This is the sum and substance of Clare's call, and what she learned from Francis was simply the how of doing this. She explains in her Testament: "The Son of God has been made for us the Way" (TestC 5). And at the beginning of her Rule, she says that for herself and her sisters, their form of life is to observe the holy Gospel.

It follows from this that a key factor in Clare's thinking is the concept of discipleship. She learned it from the one who said: "He that is mighty has done great things for me" (Luke 1:49). It is in the light of this statement that she understands her own call to be a mirror and example, surrendering herself to what we might, without too much frivolity, call the spiritual knock-on effect—we look to Clare, Clare looks to Francis, Francis looks to Christ, Christ looks to the Father. Each person in that chain has his or her own specific role. Christ is the way to the Father, Clare tells us, and Francis showed it to me (TestCl 5).

Another key idea which she learned from Mary is that of a spirituality of exchange, an exchange of nothing for everything. The everything, what she called the incomparable treasure, is hidden in the world and in the field of our hearts. We search for it and take hold of it by non-possessiveness and inner freedom. In exchange we are made co-workers of God, supporting those who need support. Clare always seemed to be aware of the wider, apostolic dimensions of her way of life. Although she had a strong sense of having opted for the eternal rather than the transient and saw the world as a deceitful and turbulent place, she was profoundly positive and optimistic towards people and life in general. This conviction seems to have governed all her relationships, within and without the community.

Clare, the New Leader of Women

When we read about Clare's early religious life and her time at the two other religious houses where "her mind was not completely at peace"(CL 10), we can see that, like the rest of us, she learned as she went along. As she matured she discovered personally how to live the Gospel. She had to undergo a long process until she measured up to John Futrells's definition of a founder as someone who drinks of the Spirit as an essential condition of life, not simply as an extra to earthly existence.

The consequence of this was the usual one—others were drawn to join her because holiness is the most attractive thing on this earth. Bernard

Häring says that what we all thirst for is an experience of the living God and that the heart of a community of faith is not a system of doctrine but a shared and profoundly disturbing experience of Jesus.[4]

This is what Clare brought to San Damiano and shared with her sisters. While she does seem to have been a leader by temperament, it was her experience of the living God which was the true source of her leadership. It was this which drew the sisters to her in the first place, as it drew the brothers to Francis. The hope of sharing this is partly why we are here today, still trying to learn from Clare and Francis how to prepare ourselves for an experience which no system of doctrine can give. This experience is much nearer to play and to poetry, to wisdom and to aesthetic experience.

The Word is Social

The Charism of the Order

How did this affect the women who became the first Poor Clares? What happened to ordinary individuals who broke with their families and came to live with this most attractive woman? Clare had become one of those who

> strike us by their unique nature and their personal light in the most absolute sense. Nothing like this has been seen before. They [are people who] have broken with the old, the usual, and this new impression is like a scandal and a madness.

Any religious family, and the early Franciscans were no exception, takes shape and is crystallized by the interaction between the charismatic founding figure and the disciples or the community. What develops is, for a short time, like a living parable of the Kingdom in which the disciples surrender themselves to the prophetic vision of the founder. As a result, that prophetic vision and parable of the Kingdom pass into the common life of the Church. From being a personal story it becomes part of the history of God's people. We can see from this how necessary it is for people such as Clare and Francis to have companions. They knew well that their companions were gifts from God and that each one had a task to perform for the wider Church through their shared life.

That moment when Clare's personal call began to interact with those who had left all to join her is the moment when her call began to crystallize. Such a moment is an extremely crucial one in the life of any group. Until then the initial gift to the Church, the charism, had been mediated through those personal qualities which were uniquely Clare's; but in the designs of the Spirit, it also needed to be enriched by the contribution from

each of the early sisters, as well as by being lived over a period of years in a particular social and ecclesiastical climate. Many of the modifications which necessarily followed would have been enlargements of the gift, but in the process of adjusting to each other, there must surely have been some diminishment as well.

Each of the first followers had to find a way to contribute her own personal calling and gifts while expressing with fidelity what she had learned from others. She had to have the courage to make her own contribution even while realizing that this might modify the original charism. This is why the interactions between the foundress and the early community, and then between the early community and its environment, are of such importance. They are the first external, modifying influences to be brought to bear on the personal call of the foundress. Through mutual commitment this new community then began to share the fruitfulness of the Church, to form Christ in others, and to share in the motherhood of Mary, the virgin made Church, as Francis called her (SalBVM 1).

The Setting

We can now look briefly at the external setting, the context in which all this was happening. We know that the great Via Francigena, the main trade route to France, crossed the valley of Spoleto from Spoleto in the south to Assisi in the north. We know that the valley was papal property, that it was subject to the Bishop of Rome and included the three dioceses of Assisi, Foligno, and Spoleto. We know that it had been granted to the papacy by Charlemagne himself—Clare's ancestor through her mother Ortolana. We know that inter-city strife was causing a complete breakdown of the rule of law—those same conflicts which drove Clare and her family into exile in about 1200 and which involved Francis in the Battle of Collestrada in 1202. As a way of strengthening his control over the area, the Pope appointed papal legates. With men such as Cardinal Ugolino in place, the Pope could deal with the political, religious, and heretical situations more directly.

At that time, the Catharist and Waldensian heresies were very strong and presented one factor which is particularly interesting to us—the unusually high profile of Cathar women. Catharism seems to have come into Lombardy partly from Bulgaria and partly from France and found strong supporters among the merchants of Italy who were constantly traveling north into France and back again. Basically, Catharism was dualistic—it saw good and evil as two principles, expressed as conflict between the spiritual and the material worlds. That dualism is still very strong today. People suspect that evil and good are equally powerful and often fear that

evil even has the edge over good. The material is seen as the primary domain of evil and the physical is linked to the material. Thus the material can be dimly perceived as either bad or irrelevant—an attitude to which the Church is not always immune. One consequence is an abandonment to physical experience; another is a devaluing of the material as irrelevant and unimportant. We see both attitudes at work today—both disastrous for the believer in an incarnate God.

One result, both negative and positive, was that women as well as men set out to free themselves from the limitations of the body and become "perfect"—they were even called perfectae. There were convents of such women living in great poverty and purity, allowed to preach and teach and engage in pastoral work. In addition to the explicitly heretical groups, there were a large number of groups whose exact definition was vague. Pope Innocent III pursued an extremely interesting and enlightened policy with regard to them, seeking to support their strengths as a preliminary to easing them back into communion with Rome. There is no doubt that he saw Francis, and later Clare, as people who would live lives every bit as poor and as pure as those of the heretics, but who would be bound by obedience to the papacy.

These issues help us to see with hindsight some of the expectations the Church had of Clare, as well as some of the needs which she and Francis tried to meet and the imbalances they corrected. We understand better Clare's insistence on poverty as something linked to the Incarnation and to the kenosis of Christ. We also see that Clare, like us, lived at a time when the institutional Church was in crisis. (When is it not?) On every front, Francis and Clare lived in a period of change, and the Church stood in great need of new and courageous incentives. The pope called a Council to try to initiate exactly such an incentive. One result was a major reorganization from the top down and a formulation of Church Law. Does that sound familiar? As part of the strengthening of legal controls, communities of women were obliged to set themselves on a sound financial footing, to remain unseen within their enclosures, and to await the coming of the bridegroom without being any trouble to the hierarchy.

But the Spirit is always more subtle than the would-be organizers of the Church. Just as in our own time we have seen the reform of Canon Law running side by side with the Charismatic renewal, so it was then. Parallel to all the organizational activity was a movement towards the simple and undefined, towards what today we might call the organic. It was typified by increased self-awareness and independence among women who were forming themselves into new social and religious groupings. Some of these, like the Beguines, consciously held back from seeking official approval in

order to retain greater freedom and autonomy.

This is the background against which Clare formed her community at San Damiano. It supports the sociological theory which suggests that a group like a religious order comes into being for at least one of three reasons: in response to a need; as an attempt to redress a balance; or because of some great and attractive person. The Franciscan movement fills all three categories. It might help us to find our way forward if, at some time, we were to think about our own vocation under each of those headings: meeting a need, redressing a balance, following our charismatic leaders.

Until they were joined by others, Francis and Clare were individuals, not initiators. By the time Clare went to San Damiano, she already had companions—Agnes was there, Pacifica was in close touch, Benvenuta came that same year (Proc 2:1). The Bull of Canonization suggests that Clare's mother, Ortolana, entered fairly early, at least before Clare became Abbess in 1215 (8). As a result of this shared life, a structure developed at San Damiano which gave a new and particular social expression to the personal Word which Clare had received. This expression explored, and largely solved, the difficulties of living a true mendicancy in a setting of external stability. Margaret Carney, in her excellent book on Clare, suggests that the friars of Clare's time could have learned a lot from her solution to the problems of how to have a house and still live radical poverty.[5]

Clare's way of life was an example of what J.B. Metz calls an institutional form of a subversive memory![6] It was a memory because the challenge of the Spirit had already been spoken and accepted. It was subversive because it came from the vast spaces of the Spirit which rarely sets up more than an uneasy balance with the institution. It was, however, unavoidably institutional in form, because it is virtually impossible for human beings to live together without structure. The subversive memory needs the structure, but even more the institution needs the subversive memory in order to stay alive and be perennially fruitful.

The Word is Historical

The Charism We Inherit

If the Word is extended in space by being shared, it is extended in time by being passed on. It moves from being social to being historical simply by the clock ticking—the founder and the first companions die. Why is it, do you think, that although Clare outlived Francis by so many years, it is only recently we have begun to think of them as being, in any real sense, co-founders of the Franciscan movement? This does seem to be one new thing that the householder is drawing out of our Franciscan treasure house

for today. Neither Poor Clares nor other Franciscans any longer see Clare as the exclusive preserve of the Second Order. Rather, we sense that she has a relevance beyond the Order or the movement or the Church to our society in general. Without any doubt, this is one of the major signs of the times for us today.

Just as those first companions had the tricky task of accepting a new gift of the Spirit, so we later generations too have a task. This task is even trickier than the earlier one, it seems to me, because the first companions always had the presence of the original charismatic figure with whom to check developments and growth. But we have this only at second hand. So we must find other ways of being faithful to the past which will enable our inheritance to mature and flourish. We must be like the Jews, who are taught by their rabbis to read the Exodus story as an account of something which has happened to each of them personally and that this identification is not a fiction, but a reality. As we read about Francis and Clare, something similar must happen for us.

The Word spoken to them was a gift of the Spirit for all time, but we inherit it through the refracting glass of the Middle Ages. Our most demanding task is to discern between the gift and the glass. To do this, we need to be steeped in the story of our beginnings. We also need to be true and ordinary people of today. You recall that Lonergan said this Word was a word about common sense? We need to be clear-sighted about the strengths and weaknesses of our society; neither canonizing nor despising either the medieval or the modern. Out of this accurate chemistry will come light for the way forward. This is what Vatican II was about, what *Perfectae Caritatis* is about, and what we have all been struggling with for the last twenty-five years. It is at the root of much of our historical research, of our formation, and of our reading. The fruit of it is to understand Clare as a woman for our times.

The Charism of Each One of Us

We, like the first brothers and sisters, have seen in Francis and Clare an incarnation of Gospel living which we can understand and which we find attractive. This is why we are here today. There is something in them which echoes in us. We are enthusiastic when we see it in each other and recognize it as something to which we too feel summoned. The other side of our call is that the gifts and graces given to each of us begin to make us like Francis and Clare; we grow to resemble them; they are true parents to us. Because we add what we are to what they were, their ground-plan or pattern shines through whatever we build on it. In this way God's original gift to the Church comes to fruition in our time.[7]

So we can come to another form of the question which we put earlier about the first companions: in what way am I relevant to the work which the Spirit began in Francis and Clare? There are two parts to this question, both rooted in the fact of the Church's mission. Every gift to the Church is *for* the world, simply because the Church is for the world. So one part of the question is: how is this gift to the world expressed in me today? The other part is: what do I contribute to it? Do I leave it richer than I found it? Or do I simply draw on it as on a deposit account which will eventually be empty? The Church and the world today count on us for both a response and a responsibility. Francis and Clare are not simply people to whom we can look back and whom we follow. Because they were called by the living God, they are the point of departure for a gift which is developing as long as it is relevant. When it ceases to be relevant, the whole Franciscan movement will shut down.

Surely it is here that we find the real meaning of Clare as a woman for today. We can only call her this if we honestly feel that she is relevant, that we do not have to manipulate her message, though we may need to translate it. If she speaks to us across the years—and it does seem that she is doing so—then ways must be found for her voice to be heard by the wider Church and by our society. I have carefully refrained from telling you why I think she is relevant, because I believe it is far more important for us to try to define this together. If she is speaking to the whole Franciscan Order, then all the branches of the Order should listen together.

The personal Word to Clare comes to us now as the Word in its historical dimension, extended in time; but it is also spoken to each one of us personally. In addition, the Spirit's gift in Clare is also open to the particular gift given to every one of us. While we must ask ourselves which elements in Clare echo most strongly for us, we must also try to discover what elements of our own call are given so that we can plow them back into the Franciscan bit of the vineyard and do our part to keep it fruitful. We must also ask what elements in Clare most speak to the needs of today's society and today's Church; and finally, how are those needs experienced by my particular branch of the Order, be it First, Second, Third, Regular or Secular? Do we all meet the same needs, or is it part of the richness of Franciscanism that different needs are met by different branches of the Order?

What I have tried to suggest is that the call given first to Clare and Francis and the charism as it lives in the wider Franciscan movement, together with the gifts and the calling of God to you and to me, are all parts of one whole. They are bound together by the presence of the Word as it is extended in space and time.

Endnotes

[1] All references to writings by and about Clare are from *Clare of Assisi, Early Documents*, ed. and trans. Regis J. Armstrong, OFM, Cap. (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 1993).

[2] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972) 113-15.

[3] References to the writings of Francis are from *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, tr. Regis J. Armstrong, OFM, Cap. and Ignatius C. Brady, OFM (New York: Paulist Press, 1982).

[4] John C. Futrell, "Discovering the Founder's Charism," in *The Way* (Supplement) 14 (1971) 65.

[5] "Atteggiamento religioso di fondo" in *Il tempo intermedio e il compimento della storia della Salvezza*, 10 MS (V/1) (Brescia, 1978) 264.

[6] P. Evdokimov, *La novità dello Spirito* (Milan, 1979) 120.

[7] Margaret Carney, *The First Franciscan Woman: Clare of Assisi & Her Form of Life* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1993) 136-137.

[8] J.B. Metz, *Tempo di religiosi? Mistica e politica della sequela* (Brescia, 1978) 34.

[9] J.M. Lozano, "Carisma e istituzione nelle comunità create dallo Spirito" in AA.VV., *Carisma e istituzione, Lo Spirito interroga i religiosi*, (Rome, 1983) 134.

Francis and Clare are not simply people to whom we can look back and whom we follow. Because they were called by the living God, they are the point of departure for a gift which is developing as long as it is relevant. When it ceases to be relevant, the whole Franciscan movement will shut down. (Frances Teresa, OSC)

The Cord, 46.4 (1996)

Clare of Assisi and Learning: A Foundation for Intellectual Life within the Franciscan Second Order

Lezlie S. Knox

At first glance, Franciscan nuns in the early decades of the thirteenth century seem unlikely to have made intellectual activities a part of their lives—to study books, to reflect on ideas, to copy manuscripts, and especially to build libraries. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, however, it is not difficult to find examples of Franciscan women in Italy who were involved with learning and promoted intellectual life within their convents. Already at the end of the thirteenth century Friar Salimbene de Adam praised the intellectual abilities of his niece, a Poor Clare in Parma: "She has an excellent understanding of Scripture, and a good memory and general intelligence."[2] During the fourteenth century, the community at Monteluce (Perugia) organized a large scriptorium and became well known for its production of manuscripts.[3] Caterina Vegri, a nun at Corpus Domini in Bologna, secretly wrote a devotional treatise and guide, *The Seven Spiritual Weapons*. After her death in 1463 this treatise became one of the most widely circulated religious texts in central and northern Italy in both manuscript and printed forms. Moreover, Roberto Rusconi, one of the foremost scholars of the medieval Franciscan Order, has remarked that the best convent libraries during the fifteenth century were found in Franciscan women's communities.[4]

One might wonder whether Clare of Assisi, the founder of the Franciscan women's order, would have been displeased by the extent to which her Order enveloped learning. Certainly, she is not generally considered one of the Middle Ages' great intellectuals. It is possible, however, that she herself might have been a model for later intellectual activities

among Franciscan nuns and that she helped their houses develop into intellectual communities. This question has remained largely unexplored because, until recently, medievalists have paid little attention to Clare beyond how she followed Francis of Assisi. She is rarely viewed as an intellectual figure since she seems too unlike the learned women of the earlier Middle Ages, such as Heloise or Hildegard.[5] Nor does her story fit easily into narratives of a female intellectual authority gained through mysticism as do those of later women such as Catherine of Siena or Angela of Foligno. The contemporary sources, however, remember Clare as "mother and *teacher* of the Order of San Damiano" (emphasis mine).[6] Because of the role which learning came to play for the Franciscans—the nuns as well as the friars—her thoughts about learning and the nature of her intellectual activities should be examined with specific regard to what it meant for Clare to be perceived as a "teacher" during the thirteenth century. To do this, I will consider especially how Clare intellectualized her devotional practices, a concept I refer to as contemplative intellection.[7]

Clare's intellectual life revolved around two poles. On the one hand, she was self-consciously a prototypical Franciscan for whom traditional learning had little place. A life marked by humility and charity that also was lived in apostolic poverty—both individual and communal—defined her years at San Damiano, the community she founded in 1212. She and the other sisters pursued this vocation, which was shared with the Franciscan friars. Their goal was to imitate Christ and become one with Him. This life of spiritual humility did not necessarily require book learning or study (especially in comparison to the importance given to *lectio divina* in the Benedictine tradition[8]). For Francis, perfect poverty meant that the friars should not own books either individually or as a community, nor should they pursue academic study because it risked engendering intellectual pride.[9]

While spiritual humility certainly did not originate among the Franciscans, Francis developed his own understanding of this moral virtue in relation to education and learning. He associated learning with a certain "pride of place"—namely that held at both schools and ecclesiastical courts by clerics trained in advanced theology—and he envisioned his friars as not enjoying the status of learned clergy.[10] Yet, during the first half of the thirteenth century, the friars lived in a state of tension between their professed humility and their need to allow a role for teaching and preaching in the Order.[11] This need seemed less applicable to cloistered nuns. Clare did not leave any statements about whether learning might jeopardize the spiritual life of the sisters, nor did she comment on the friars' struggles to accommodate learning into their Order. Events during her life,[12]

however, suggest that Clare mistrusted intellectual activities and felt they might not enhance the Franciscan charism.

To understand her ideas about learning, it is important to understand the life Clare lived at San Damiano. We begin by examining how the rules that governed her community defined or created a place for intellectual activities. Unlike the Benedictine Rule or the Augustinian Rule adopted by the Dominican nuns, the *Form of Life* Clare wrote in the 1250's for San Damiano and its daughter communities did not provide a place for instruction in reading and writing, nor did it designate time for devotional reading.[13] Clare's text was not the first rule for the Second Order;[14] in 1219 Cardinal Hugolino de Segni, the future Gregory IX, adapted the Benedictine Rule for San Damiano. In chapter 5 on the Divine Office, he wrote: "If there are some young or even older women who are humble and capable of learning, the Abbess, if she sees fit, may appoint a capable and discerning mistress to teach them to read" (RHug 5). This passage was also included in Pope Innocent IV's rule for the Franciscan nuns written in 1247 (RInn 2). In drafting her rule, Clare excluded these passages. She did so in spite of the fact that young girls who would presumably need instruction in reading and writing to participate fully in liturgical life entered her community. Concerning education, Clare turned away from her community's earlier rules—as well as from the female monastic tradition—to make her *form of life* directly parallel to the respective passage in Francis's Rule of 1223 for the Friars Minor.[15] Her citing of Francis marked Clare's belief that the friars and nuns shared one charism. It might also indicate that, like Francis, she felt learning detracted from their spiritual life and so assigned no space for education at San Damiano.

Clare did not believe, however, that intellectual activities should be entirely avoided. She herself owned a breviary[16] and there were readings during meals and as part of the Liturgy of the Hours in her community (Proc 7:11).[17] But Clare believed that learning should be moderated and highly controlled. Therefore, in her Rule, she distinguished between literate and illiterate nuns in describing liturgical practices. Those who were literate might read the Divine Office, while the illiterate recited the *Lord's Prayer* (RCl 3:1-3). At the same time, she did not want the illiterate sisters to make an effort to learn to read:

> Let those who do not know how to read not be eager to learn. Let them direct their attention to what they should desire above all else: the Spirit of the Lord and Its holy activity, to pray always to Him with a pure heart, and to have humility, patience in difficulty and infirmity, and to love those who persecute, blame and accuse us. . . . (RCl 10:8-11).

These passages suggest that Clare established at San Damiano a community that formally disengaged from the traditional ways we have understood learning: instruction in reading and writing, devotional reading—even of Scripture, or the copying of manuscripts. An image of Clare emerges as a woman who resisted learning and feared intellectual pride. At San Damiano mental prayer and contemplation, rather than devotional study, would guide the nuns to their understanding of religious life and their encounter with the Divine.[18] Nevertheless, this image of Clare and San Damiano is challenged by Clare's own actions and engagement with learning and use of intellectual activities.

At the opposite pole from her desire to restrain learning, we can consider Clare as a learned woman. Although some scholars had thought she dictated to a scribe,[19] most medievalists today accept that she herself wrote the seven surviving Latin texts attributed to her.[20] These writings include the Rule, four letters to Agnes of Prague, a Testament, and a Blessing for the nuns at San Damiano. Moreover, since there are extant letters to Clare—from cardinals and popes, as well as from other nuns—it is easy to imagine many letters written by her that are now lost. These epistles should not be dismissed as "mere letters"—in the thirteenth century letter writing remained uncommon among women, even in Italian cities.[21] Indeed, these letters demonstrate her learning and intellectual abilities. Her Latin was never very sophisticated, but Clare nonetheless displayed sufficient familiarity with its grammar that she could shift style and tone as appropriate to the genre of her text. Moreover, the very act of Clare's writing was vital and challenging. In some ways, her most audacious text was the *form of life* written for San Damiano. Clare was the first woman in the medieval Latin church to write a rule for nuns,[22] making her the first woman to define the lives of other women through an authoritative textual form. Clare's text borrowed from both Hugolino's and Innocent's Rules and was modeled closely on Francis's, but this fact should not be taken as evidence of her "lack of originality" or a "derivative nature." Rather, it demonstrates her ability to draw from established texts and sources to make her own points. With the Rule in particular, but also with the teachings recorded in her letters, she established a precedent for the written word and texts to guide her community. Moreover, these textual records disclose the tension the nuns shared with the friars as Clare both tried to restrain learnedness at San Damiano and yet used her learning for spiritual instruction.

Thomas of Celano, who knew Clare personally, observed that the nuns at San Damiano "learn in [contemplation] everything they should do or avoid and they know with joy how to leave the mind for God" (1Cel 18).

He suggested that their learning was superior to that gained from books because it had come directly from God. In his First Life of Francis, Thomas called the learnedness of the sisters "wisdom from God" (1Cel 18), a phrase Clare herself used in her Third Letter to Agnes of Prague: "[You are] helped by a special gift of wisdom from the mouth of God himself and in an awe-inspiring and unexpected way" (3LAg 6). This term, wisdom—sapien*tia* in Latin, can best be explained with reference to another gift of the Holy Spirit, *scientia* (often translated as knowledge).[23] By the thirteenth century, *scientia* had become a word most often used to indicate learning gained from books or treatises studied at the university or in other schools.[24] This institutional practice is completely absent in Clare's writings. For Thomas and Clare, their learning had moved beyond reading books and formal study to emphasize the importance of prayer and contemplation as a means to understanding. *Scientia* gave way to *sapientia* in communities of Franciscan women.

The nuns at San Damiano distinguished between learning gained from books and *sapientia* acquired through contemplation. At Clare's canonization process one nun, Sister Agnes (daughter of the podestà of Assisi and not Clare's natural sister), testified that "Lady Clare delighted in hearing the Word of God. Although she had never studied letters, she nevertheless listened willingly to learned sermons" (Proc 10:8). Her hagiographical legend similarly reported:

> Although she was not educated in the liberal arts, she nevertheless enjoyed listening to the sermons of those who were, because she believed that a nucleus lay hidden in the text that she could astutely perceive and enjoy with relish. She knew what to take out of the sermon of any preacher that might be profitable to the soul (CL 37).

When these passages state that "Clare had not learned letters," they do not mean that Clare was illiterate, but rather that the type of learning she possessed was different from that of the learned preacher. But this knowledge was in no way less valid because the nuns gained understanding not only through hearing learned sermons, but also though their contemplation. Thus Sister Agnes's testimony continued:

> One day when Brother Philip of Arti of the Order of Friars Minor was preaching, the witness saw a very handsome young boy, who seemed to be about three years old, appear to St. Clare. While she, the witness, was praying in her heart that God would not let her be deceived, He answered her in her heart with these words: "I am in their midst," signifying through these words the young boy Jesus

Christ Who stood in the midst of the preachers and listeners when they were preaching and listening as they should (Proc 10:8).

The significance of this scene described by Sister Agnes is that the Christ Child became visible during the sermon only to Clare and the other women but not to the preacher. The learned man lacked the understanding that the vision represented to the "unlearned" women. Indeed, the point is precisely that they are not actually "unlearned" but gifted with wisdom/*sapientia*. Although the women had not studied the liberal arts to prepare for a career of preaching, contemplation prepared them to understand the preacher's teaching and facilitated their knowledge of the Divine. Hence, both Clare and her sisters constructed an internal topography of learning based in contemplation and signified as *sapientia*.

From within this internalized intellectual space, Clare connected the knowledge she gained with more traditional intellectual activities. Prayer was always one of the central aspects of her vocation, and she often reflected on it in her letters to Agnes of Prague. In her third letter, she described the three steps of prayer: "O most noble Queen, gaze upon [Him], consider [Him], contemplate [Him], as you desire to imitate [Him]" (3LAg 20). Clare expanded this practice in her final letter written shortly before she died. She advised Agnes to gaze into a mirror and see poverty, humility, and charity reflected back and told her that these virtues might be contemplated throughout the entire mirror. At the border, Agnes should see Christ's poverty revealed in the image of the Child placed in the humble manger. On the mirror's surface, Agnes should reflect on humility as she considered how Christ had suffered for human redemption. Lastly, in the mirror's depths, Agnes should contemplate Christ's charity in suffering the Crucifixion and dying a shameful death.[25] Through this contemplative exercise Clare taught her fellow sister and effective pupil how to reach an understanding of their lives as Franciscans. One might see this text as a representation of Clare's mysticism, her affective and experiential understanding of union with and worship of the Divine. These passages also reveal, however, how Clare intellectualized this spiritual experience.

Her division of the practice of prayer into steps and her use of the analogy of the mirror demonstrate how these women, who had never pursued academic training and who deemphasized study at San Damiano, nevertheless engaged learnedness. With Francis and many other medieval spiritual authors, Clare shared the image of the mirror, but from within her contemplation she transformed its purposes.[26] Whereas Francis had stressed being a mirror for others in the world, Clare turned the image around both to reflect and to reflect on Christ.[27] Her evocation of this theme demonstrates how she engaged ideas active in the learned culture, incorporated

them intellectually, and then taught them effectively. Moreover, this image of the mirror functioned as a space through which Clare, Agnes, and other Franciscan women could explore their understanding of the Divine through contemplation. In practice, the mirror became an example of an intellectual space where learning occurred.

Reviewing Clare's life in this way begins to explain how she became both model and authorization for future learning among Franciscan women and helped their convents to develop as intellectual communities. We do not know where Clare wrote—whether in a cell, a study, or at a table in the refectory. This lack of a specific intellectual space at San Damiano emphasizes that we need to look beyond the physical structures for learning and learnedness. At San Damiano and other communities of Franciscan women, Clare's contemplative intellection internally mapped a feminine intellectual space throughout the convent.

Endnotes

[1] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 30th International Congress on Medieval Studies in May 1995. A longer version of this essay is in the third chapter of my dissertation in progress ("Breaching the Convent Wall: Learning, Learnedness, and Medieval Religious Women") at the Medieval Institute of the University of Notre Dame. In the many drafts of this paper, I am particularly grateful for the comments and encouragement of Mark Jordan, Ingrid Peterson, John Van Engen, and Lisa Wolverton.

[2] *The Chronicle of Salimbene de Adam* trans. by John L. Baird (Binghamton: MRTS, 1986): 177.

[3] Katherine Gill, "Women and the Production of Religious Literature in the Vernacular, 1300-1500," in *Creative Women and the Arts*, 67, and Ugolino Nicolini OFM, "I Minori Osservanti di Monteripido e lo "scriptorium" delle clarisse di Monteluce in Perugia nei secoli XV e XVI," *Picenum Seraphicum* 9 (1971): 100-130.

[4] Roberto Rusconi, "Sources for the History of Religious Women in the Later Middle Ages (Italy, 13th to 16th centuries)," paper presented at the 28th International Medieval Studies Congress, Western Michigan University, May 1993, typescript.

[5] Learned women during the Middle Ages were usually considered exceptional as the title of a 1980 essay collection on women's learning demonstrates: *Beyond Their Sex: Learned Women of the European Past* (New York: University of New York Press, 1980). Often both historically and historiographically women's learning has been judged according to male standards so that only women who fit into these categories (e.g. university training, scholastic writing) are learned.

[6] For this phrase see Proc. 20:7 which recalled the wording of the Official Notification of her Death: "Venerable mother and teacher." All English translations of Clare are from Regis J. Armstrong, OFM Cap. ed. and trans. *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, 2nd. edition (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 1993).

[7] Regarding Clare as a teacher, the mid-thirteenth-century *Versified Legend* also recalled "Clare, the teacher of children, instructress of the unlearned" (line 1073) and "as a mother teaches her children by her way of life" (line 1075).

[8] I develop the concept of contemplative intellection at length in my dissertation.

[9] See Jean LeClerq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, 3rd. edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982): 15-17, 72.

[10] Francis testified to his respect for learned men in his Testament (13): "We should honor and venerate theologians too, and the ministers of God's word, because it is they who give us spirit and life," (*St. Francis of Assisi: Omnibus of Sources*, ed. Marion Habig, OFM, 4th. edition (Quincy IL: Franciscan Press, 1991). Francis did not think that the friars needed to pursue learning, however, telling his brethren that people were more moved by the prayers of the humble than by the most learned preaching (Bonaventure, *Major Life*) and reminding them to be humble before all (*Admonitions* 7, *Praises of the Virtues*, and the *Mirror of Perfection* 69).

[11] Francis was greatly angered when he discovered that a house of study had been built for the friars in Bologna (*Mirror of Perfection* 6; 2Cel 58). Another time he told a friar who asked whether the communities could own books that if he had his way, the friars would own nothing but the habit granted to them in the Rule (*Legend of Perugia*, 66).

[12] John Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968): 99, 103.

[13] One example is Clare's desire to maintain radical poverty. While Clare's main focus was ownership of property, her concern to avoid any possessions could have included books. In January of 1228, Pope Gregory IX had to order the Franciscan nuns at Monteluce to accept and not discard the books left to them by a Brother Angelo and threatened them with excommunication if they did so. The text of the Pope's communication is printed in *Bullarium Franciscanum* I, 38.

[14] For example, the feminine version of the Augustine Rule proclaims (5:10): "Books will be available every day at the appointed hour, and not at any other time." See Tarsicius J. Van Bavel OSA, *The Rule of Saint Augustine: Masculine and Feminine Versions*. Trans. Raymond Canning, OSA (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984). Both Augustinian and Benedictine Rules also make provisions for table readings, which we know occurred at San Damiano as well, although Clare did not mention it in her Rule.

[15] Originally San Damiano had lived under a primitive form of life given to them by Francis that simply called upon them to live in the spirit of the Holy Gospel (RCl 6:2-4). After the Fourth Lateran Council which banned new religious foundations, however, the community was under pressure to adopt an existing rule. This council's decree led directly to the rule written by Cardinal Hugolino.

[16] At Clare's canonization hearing, Sister Lucia and Sister Agnes testified that they had come to San Damiano as young girls, Proc 8:2 and 10:1.

[17] Clare adopted Francis's form and structure, excluding only his chapter on preachers (9). She used chapters 6 (lack of possessions) and 10 (admonition and correction of the sisters) entirely, and in the other chapters only made changes as necessary due to the nuns gender or situation.

[18] A manuscript, known as the breviary of St. Clare, is preserved at San Damiano, which was taken over by the friars around 1260 when the nuns moved closer to Assisi. See Stephen Aurelian Van Dijk, OFM, "The Breviary of St. Clare," in *Franciscan Studies* 8 (1948): 25-46, 351-87.

[19] "[Sister Balvina] also said, because of her simplicity, she would not know in any way how to speak about the good and the virtues in [Clare], that is, her humility, kindness, patience and other good virtues which she had in such abundance that she firmly believed, except for the Virgin Mary, no other woman was greater than the Lady. Asked how she knew this, she replied *she had heard about the sanctity of many other women saints through their legends*, but she had seen the sanctity of the life of this Lady Clare during all the time." [Emphasis mine].

[20] "Meditate constantly on the mysteries of the cross and the agonies of His mother standing at the foot of the cross. Pray and always be vigilant (LEr 12-13)." While this letter is probably not an authentic letter written by Clare to Ermentrude of Bruges, nonetheless it represents her spiritual ideas and ideals.

[21] Cf. Lázaro Iriarte, "Clare of Assisi: Her Place in Female Hagiography," *Greyfriars Review* 7 (1989): 185.

[22] *Claire d'Assise: Écrits. Sources Chrétiennes*, ed. and trans. Marie-France Becker, Jean-François Godet, and Thaddée Matura, (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1985) 34. The editors argue that Clare composed and wrote her own texts because of a unity of inspiration, common style (with change due to the nature of the texts), and personal nature.

[23] A collection of essays on women's epistolary tradition includes only three examples that predate Clare. Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus, eds. *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993).

[24] Earlier rules for women were always written by men (cf. the feminine adaptation of the Augustinian and Benedictine Rules); Hildegard wrote a commentary on the Rule of Benedict but did not make specific changes (other than those necessary regarding time and place) or identify it as an independent rule. See Hildegard of Bingen, *Explanation of the Rule of Benedict*, trans. Hugh Feiss, OSB (Toronto: Peregrina, 1990). For a perspective on Clare's rule and authorship, see Margaret Carney, *The First Franciscan Woman: Clare of Assisi and Her Form of Life* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1993).

[25] The second chapter of my dissertation focuses on the relationship between the gifts of the Holy Spirit used to talk about learning and understanding *(sapientia, scientia,* and *intellectus)* and how the understanding of these gifts was gendered.

[26] Charles Vulliez, "Le vocabulaire des écoles urbaines des XIIè et XIIIè siècles à travers les *summae dictaminis*," in *Vocabulaires des écoles et des méthodes d'enseignement au moyen âge*, ed. Olga Weijers (Turnholt, 1992) 90.

[27] Clare uses these images in 4LAg 18-23.

[28] Regis J. Armstrong, OFM Cap. "Clare of Assisi: The Mirror Mystic," *The Cord* (August 1985): 197-8.

[29] Marco Bartoli, *Clare of Assisi*, trans. Frances Teresa OSC (Quincy IL: Franciscan Press, 1993) 117-118.

A Biographical Profile

of

Sister Marie Beha, OSC
Monastery of St. Clare
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Sister Marie Beha, OSC, brings a rich life experience to her service on the editorial board of *The Cord*. She began her religious life as a Franciscan Sister of Joliet, IL, receiving the habit in 1943 and making final vows in 1947. She taught high school and college and earned her MA and PhD from the Franciscan Institute at St. Bonaventure, NY, specializing in Franciscan medieval philosophy.

After twenty years of teaching, she changed ministries in 1969 and served for two years as Associate Executive Secretary for the Sister Formation Conference (now Religious Formation Conference) in Washington, DC.

In 1973, Sister Marie answered her heart's desire by transferring to the Monastery of St. Clare in Greenville, SC, where she made her solemn vows.

As a Greenville Poor Clare, she has served her community as abbess, vicaress, directress of formation, and member of the discretorium. Presently, her days are filled with the rhythm of the Liturgy of the Hours, the daily round of simple work that is the staple of her life. She also spends some few hours per week writing and preparing talks. Last year she gave retreats to the Carmelite Sisters in Cleveland and to the friars of Assumption Province in Burlington, WI. She continues to publish in *The Cord, Sisters Today, Review for Religious,* and *Human Development.*

Sister Marie reflects on her life in this way:

> Being a Poor Clare is so rich an experience that I hardly feel justified putting it with the "poor" in our title. Gratitude for the "grace of our holy vocation" can be my only response. I am excited about the ways in which I see our 700-year-old tradition opening to new possibilities in the 21st century, including new opportunities to share our charism with others. I am also very interested in sharing as a Clare with the other branches of the Order. Our family connections are a part of our heritage that I am particularly happy to deepen.

CLARE'S CHARISM

Marie Beha, OSC

Introduction

To what am personally I called? The question is familiar, dynamic, insistent. It is one we must answer over and over again in everyday decisions and life style changes. Equally important is the question: to what are we called as community? How are we being invited in our communal reality to grow, to respond to the call of the Lord, to change in ways that affect how we live and serve?

Discovering our communal vocation brings us face to face with the gift that is our community charism, the way we are graced before the Lord for others. Equating our common call with charism is only the beginning, the easy part. Examining its meaning is the on-going challenge.

The general elements of a community's charism are relatively stable, providing a kind of last name identity that allows us to know something of a group's orientation. We speak of a community as being Dominican or Franciscan, influenced by Jesuit spirituality or Benedictine in orientation. The labels are familiar and convenient. But no matter how widely used, they reveal very little of a community's particular giftedness because they are so general. We still need to spell out the specifics of community charism since self-knowledge is as necessary for a group as it is for an individual.

Franciscan Origins of Clare's Charism

Clare of Assisi linked her call with that of Francis. This is clear and certain. In her Testament (37)[1] she speaks of herself as "the little plant of the holy father," and to the end of her life she continued to pay tribute to Francis as her "most blessed father" and "inspiration." In the same way, she wanted her daughters always to consider themselves Franciscan, ob-

serving the same obedience to the successors of Francis as they had promised the saint himself (TestCl 50).

While insisting on this general identification of her Order with the Franciscan family, even fighting for it against an early papal attempt to classify her as "Benedictine," Clare came to realize that her charism was distinct from that of the friars. She and her daughters were to live out their vocation within the enclosure of San Damiano, not in the direct ministry. Similarly, while sharing the same basic orientation to poverty that is one of the most clearly identifying elements of Franciscan life, Clare developed her own unique understanding of what this meant for her and how it would shape the lives of her sisters. She likewise experienced community in a way different from but related to the fraternity that characterized the other followers of Francis. Finally, she and her sisters knew the common Franciscan call to contemplation, but also lived this out in ways that were different from all the other branches of the Franciscan family.

The interrelationship of these elements of poverty, community, and contemplation constitutes the special grace of a Franciscan vocation. The nuancing of this interrelationship distinguishes the charism of each particular branch of the Order. We will examine this thesis in terms of Clare's charism as it was spelled out in her writings and in the lives of the first Poor Sisters.

Clare's Charism of Poverty.

How did Clare experience her call to poverty? We know that it began with her desire to live a gospel life following in the footsteps of Francis. Like all of Assisi, she heard how he had renounced his patrimony, even returning his clothes to his father as part of a single-minded commitment to having only one Father in heaven. Clare too renounced her patrimony, selling it and giving the proceeds to the poor. On Palm Sunday night she made her way through the night to the Portiuncula where Francis waited for her. From his hands she received the coarse woolen tunic that would mark her as a follower of Lady Poverty.

Clare spent the first week of her Franciscan life with the Benedictines, experiencing the monastic rhythm of the Liturgy of the Hours alternating with simple manual work. These values spoke to her own desires. But she also observed the hierarchical structure of the community and the middle class comfort, neither of which coincided with the attraction of her spirit.

After another brief period with a group that has been variously identified as lay penitents or recluses, Clare finally came to the place of her beginnings. As she says in her Testament: "By the will of God and our most

blessed father Francis, we went to dwell in the Church of San Damiano"(30), the very same small structure where Francis had heard a voice from the cross saying: "Go and repair my church." Here Clare found a home for her poverty; she would spend the remaining forty years of her life faithful to the charism of Francis but modifying it in innovative ways.

At this period of history, contemplative women living an enclosed life were supported by dowries. Whether a piece of land or some cattle or other livestock, a dowry was intended to support a sister during her lifetime and accrue to the monastery on her death. It was the sister's security and the monastery's endowment. The system had worked well for centuries; in fact it had worked too well. Monasteries became comfortable; some even wealthy. They offered safety, the assuance of always having enough.

It was not "enough" for Clare. What she wanted was the insecurity of having nothing. She had already begun this process when she gave away her dowry, reducing herself to the same absolute poverty that Francis had espoused. This was the privilege she wanted, not only for her sisters as individuals, but also for the community. The monastery would have nothing, renouncing the security of communal ownership.

This, however, the Pope did not wish to allow. The risk was too great. How could these contemplative women survive? Their enclosure precluded their going out to beg as the friars did. They would starve to death!

But Clare persisted. Her vocation, distinct from that of Francis, was to be both poor and enclosed. She petitioned Innocent III for an indult that would allow the sisters at San Damiano the "privilege of poverty," and in 1215 the Pope granted them this "privilege."

It was only a beginning, however. Innocent's successor, Gregory IX, despite his personal admiration for Francis and Clare, perhaps because of it, decided to provide for the future of the Order of Poor Ladies by giving them a new Rule of his own composing. Basically Benedictine, it allowed the sisters to own property.

Once again Clare protested, and once again a Pope retreated before the strength of her conviction. Gregory, too, conceded the "Privilege of Poverty" to her and to her sisters at San Damiano.

Clare knew with the certainty of a God-given call that the vocation of all her sisters was to live in complete dependence on the provident care of God, unencumbered by any secure source of income. Her determination to provide such insecurity for the Poor Sisters must have been further fueled by the difficulties the brothers were experiencing. As the First Order grew and became more involved in preaching and teaching, it became increasingly difficult to reconcile absolute communal poverty with the demands of the apostolate. This was not Clare's problem. Her sisters had no

need of houses of study; they could afford the privilege of complete poverty. To ensure this as the heritage of all who would come after her, Clare began to formulate a Rule of her own. It was the work of a lifetime, approved by the Pope just days before she died.

In it she not only claimed the right of the Poor Ladies to live "without anything of their own," but she also legislated for this with a prudence learned from experience. She speaks about the sisters'

> not receiving or having possession or ownership either of themselves or through an intermediary, or even anything that might reasonably be called property, except as much land as necessity requires for the integrity and proper seclusion of the monastery, and this land may not be cultivated except as a garden for the needs of the sisters (RCl 6:12-15).

Here she concedes that radical non-ownership permits owning the buildings and grounds essential for the day-by-day functioning of the monastery. She does not resort to the legal fiction of putting the title into the hands of someone else designated by the community. The sisters would own the monastery, but in such a way that nothing beyond the bare minimum was theirs. Similarly, she permitted the sisters to receive and handle money, a practice that Francis forbade. Her heart told her that the root of all evil was not money, but greed

Like Francis, Clare and her sisters would be mendicants: "Let them confidently send for alms. Nor should they be ashamed, since the Lord made Himself poor in this world for us" (RCl 8:2-3). But begging was to be the exception. Ordinarily the sisters would work for their daily bread "in such a way that, while they banish idleness, the enemy of the soul, they do not extinguish the Spirit of holy prayer and devotion to which all other things of our earthly existence must contribute" (RCl 7:2).

Like Francis, Clare's motivation was not primarily economic, but rather a desire to be like Jesus. In a letter to Agnes of Prague, Clare wrote, "O God-centered poverty, whom the Lord Jesus Christ . . . condescended to embrace before all else" (1LAg 17). She repeatedly linked the poverty of Jesus with his infancy as well as with the utter destitution of his dying on the cross (4LAg 19-23). And in many passages she also joined the poverty of Jesus to that of his mother.

Clare and her sisters were called to the same radical poverty as Francis and his brothers. But Clare's practice was more perilous because of the enclosed character of the sisters' contemplative lifestyle. They relied not only on alms, but also on having the alms brought to them. Even the kind of work they did was limited by their enclosed life. But it was this same life together that would transform radical poverty into rich treasure, a joyous way of incarnating the self-emptying of Jesus in the crib and on the cross.

Clare's Charism of Community

Fraternity and community are core values for followers of Francis and Clare. As one of the most faithful disciples of Francis, Clare experienced this attraction to poverty and contemplation in a community of sisters, however, rather than in a fraternity. The distinction is more far reaching than the simple differentiation between women and men. It speaks to the orientation of relationships within the group and to the community's relation to those to whom it ministers.

In a fraternity, individuals relate primarily to other individuals; it is these individualized relationships which bind the group together. In other words, it is the interaction of member to member that eventually unites the whole group into a fraternity of mutually related brothers or sisters. A helpful image might be that of a circle of persons, each holding the hand of the one next to him or her and so forming a circle. Life energy moves around the circle as members deepen their relationships with each other, and it is this renewal of "spirit and life" that makes fraternity such a rich resource for energizing ministry.

In community, on the other hand, each member relates primarily to the whole, and the total community relates to each individual. Members entrust themselves to the community, working to maintain and strengthen it, responding to its needs in love. Communal faith and shared values bond the group in growing openness; life together *is* their ministry.

This distinction in relationships is one way of differentiating between fraternity and community. While it is certainly true that most groups have some elements of each, when the predominate pattern is one on one, we have fraternity; when it is more a matter of each person relating to the whole, we have community.

Another distinction concerns the way the group relates to those beyond its parameters. A fraternity comes together for ministry, preparing the members for its challenges and sustaining them during periods of special difficulty. The individualized relationships of the group renew and refresh them, enabling their being given to others in ministry. Picture Francis and his first few brothers going out to preach and then coming back to the Portiuncula for renewal or the early friars returning from their far- flung missions to the encouragement of a Chapter of Mats.

Contrast this with Clare's purely contemplative community whose members were always together. Sharing life in community was the sisters' ministry. Clare's gift did not require that she be geographically present to those to whom she ministered; the overflow of life within helped to vitalize the whole Body of Christ. Community held priority; life together was the challenge of the apostolate. Its ascesis is immediately obvious. There is

no escape from the demands of relating within community—none of the excitement of new beginnings, nor the hope that difficult situations will be solved by a change of personnel. The sisters would either relate to each other in the truth and love of Jesus or their life would be reduced to perpetual imprisonment. Despite such obvious difficulties, close community also promised special joys—the opportunity to grow in unity of mind and heart that such constant living together makes possible; the support of a shared belief that this hidden intercession really does make a difference.

Practical woman that Clare was she describes the "how" of this ideal in terms of day to day living. Though she is writing for her Poor Clare sisters, many of the practices she mentions are applicable to other forms of life in community. Here her debt to Francis is especially evident, as she takes his concerns and spotlights them within the small circle of enclosed community.

The goal of the sisters' efforts is to "preserve the unity of mutual love and peace" (RCl 4:22). To make this possible Clare requires that whatever concerns the group as a whole is to be decided by the group as a whole (RCl 4:15-18). Examples of this kind of communal responsibility range from giving all the sisters a voice regarding the persons who are to be received into community (RCl 2:1-2) to sharing with all the sisters the good news about alms received. Similarly the work assignments of each sister affect the common good and so are made known to all (RCl 7:3).

Decisions are made in a chapter composed of all the members who have made their final profession. In the chapter the sisters also acknowledge "their common and public offenses" (RCl 4:16). How wise! The offender needs to admit to herself and to others that she has failed. Such humility is bound to diminish the kind of critical spirit that weakens unity in any group.

Clare warns against letting a climate of anger settle in, chilling relationships and hardening hearts.

> The abbess and her sisters, however, must beware not to become angry or disturbed on account of anyone's sin, for anger and disturbance prevent charity in oneself and in others (RCl 9:5).

She is not speaking of the flash of anger that is an instinctive and healthy response to provocation, but the nurturing of this emotion through continued critical judgment, gossip, resentment, revenge. All these damage that peace so essential for living a contemplative life. If a sister offends another, the Rule restates the gospel injunction of mutual responsibility both to seek and to receive pardon, so that what begins as negative ends up strengthening the bond of charity (RCl 9: 6-10). "If a mother loves and cherishes her child according to the flesh, how much more diligently should a sister love

and cherish her sister according to the Spirit" (RCl 8:16).

How are the sisters to show such sisterly love for each other? Again, Clare is eminently practical. She suggests that the sisters should be so comfortable in their relations with one another that each can "confidently manifest her needs to the other" (RCl 8:16). Such manifestation requires some minimum of communication, and in the interests of gospel charity Clare allows the sisters "to communicate whatever is necessary always and everywhere, briefly and in a low tone of voice" (RCl 5:4). In response to the other's known need, she also permits a sister who has received a gift she herself does not need to "give it lovingly to a sister who does need it" (RCl 8:10).

In a community made strong by this kind of sisterly love, what is the role of authority? It is different from the Benedictine model. Clare saw how authority could assume a position superior to others. A Benedictine abbess could hold office for life and sometimes even live apart from the community in privilege, if not in fact. Clare's leader, however, would remain "sister," even when she added the title and responsibilities of "mother." She would always exercise authority as a "servant." This was the ideal abbess in the community of the "Poor Ladies;" it was the way Clare lived almost all of the forty years of her religious life.

Only reluctantly and under obedience, did Clare assume the title of abbess, but she redefined its meaning in the large letters of life experience. She remained a "sister," living the common life, sleeping in the dormitory, eating in the refectory and taking part in all the simple work of the community (RCl 4:13). If she claimed any privilege in regard to the latter, it was to reserve for herself the most menial of tasks, for instance, cleaning up after the sisters who were sick.

Clare, however, does not reduce authority to a purely horizontal relationship. The leader is also discerning and attentive to her sisters as a good mother, taking care "especially to provide for them according to the needs of each one out of the alms that the Lord shall give" (TestCl. 63-64). The Proceedings of the Process of Canonization give repeated evidence of Clare's maternal concern: making her way through the dormitory at night to ensure that the sisters had adequate blankets against the cold, consoling them when they were troubled, and miraculously multiplying bread when it seemed there would not be enough for the community's dinner.

As a good mother Clare likewise paid her sisters the supreme compliment of trusting them. "Should anything be sent to a sister by her relatives or others, let the Abbess give it to the sister. If she needs it, she may use it" (RCl 8:9-10). Each individual is responsible for her own decision about personal need and the ultimate disposition of her goods.

Finally, Clare's ideal abbess was to be the servant of all the sisters, who should "speak and act with her as ladies do with their servant" (RCl 10:4). Note, she does not speak only of "serving" but of being "servant." This role was one that Clare cherished. She describes her own practice when she challenges her successors to be "so kind and available that [the sisters] may safely reveal their needs and confidently have recourse to her at any hour, as they see fit both for themselves and their sisters" (TestCl 65-66). But Clare was not content to encourage the sisters to come to her in their need. She also gave practical example of being a servant by washing their feet, serving them at table, and waiting on the sick (CL 12).

Like the Suffering Servant who was her model, Clare was willing to lay down her life for her sisters. When the Saracens threatened to overrun the monastery, they were turned back by Clare standing between the mercenaries and the sisters saying: "I wish to be your ransom . . . place me before them" (Proc. 4:14). This is a summarizing image of Clare the leader—in front, yes, but for the sake of serving, giving life, to those who were her sisters.

Apostolic Contemplative

Identifying Clare with the contemplative life is almost automatic: Clare before the San Damiano crucifix; Clare in choir with her sisters; Clare rapt in Eucharistic devotion. These images accurately underline the priority of the life of prayer for her and her sisters; but they remain incomplete, needing to be complemented by images of concerned community member, caring healer, dedicated apostle. It is the balance of all these elements that speaks to Franciscan contemplation.

The primacy of prayer is evident, both in Clare's life and in her writing. As she says plainly in her Rule, the sisters are to do nothing to "extinguish the Spirit of holy prayer and devotion to which all other things of our earthly existence must contribute" (RCl 7:2). Praising God daily in the Liturgy of the Hours and in the Eucharist was the pattern of their lives. At regular intervals each day they gathered to intercede before God in the name of and for all "God's holy people."

But even such a rich ration of liturgical prayer was not enough for Clare; her focus on Jesus became still more intimate as she came to "gaze upon Him, consider Him, contemplate Him, as [she] desired to imitate Him" (2LAg 20). This is what Clare did until her whole life was transformed, like that of Francis, into an image of the Crucified Christ. Clare explains the process of this transformation using the popular image of the mirror:

> Gaze upon that mirror each day . . . and continually study your face within it that you may adorn yourself within and without with beautiful robes, covered . . . with the flowers and garments of all the virtues (4LAg. 15-17).

The mirror is Jesus. And what does Clare see when she looks in this mirror? First of all, herself in Jesus, herself in the love God has for her. That is contemplative self-knowledge—we are loved and lovely in God's eyes. True we are also sinners; but loved sinners. That is the meaning of incarnation and death/resurrection. We, in all the uniqueness that is our own personal giftedness and weakness, are worth the redemption.

Clare urges Agnes (and us) to keep looking in the mirror that is Jesus until this simple but central truth of our being loved moves from acknowledged theory to blazing, life-giving reality. Clare could not stop looking. For forty years she prayed before the very same crucifix that had summoned Francis to rebuild the Church. She and Francis would do it together in different ways. Clare was a contemplative with the heart of an apostle; Francis was an apostle with the heart of a contemplative. Together they spelled out the charism of Franciscan contemplative living.

The apostolic thrust of Francis's whole life is clear. From the beginning he and the friars were called to proclaim the good news, carrying the gospel even into mission countries. The friars were to be itinerant preachers. But Francis also had the heart of a contemplative; he longed for the silence and solitude that would allow him simply to be in the presence of his beloved. We know how the tension between these two attractions led him to consult with Clare and Sylvester who both confirmed his call to remain active in the direct apostolate. Francis accepted their discernment, but continued all his life to spend three to six months each year in solitary prayer in remote places. Such emphasis on solitude was integral to his understanding of what it meant to be a Franciscan apostle.

In Clare's case the same attraction gave rise to a different expression of the charism. Her call to contemplation seems obvious; that she also had the spirit and motivation of an apostle may be less evident. The early sources tell us how, when she heard of the martyrdom of the first friars in Morocco, she expressed her longing to give her own life in the same way. And that is exactly what she did with equal generosity in the forty years of her enclosed life. In the Bull *of Canonization*, Pope Alexander IV described how "in the austerity of her cloistered solitude, she broke the alabaster jar of her body with her severity, the whole church was thoroughly imbued with the fragrance of her sanctity" (4).

Clare's self-giving love, like that of Jesus, issued in self-sacrifice. Her sisters testify over and over again how she devoted herself to their service, healing their illnesses, consoling them in their difficult times, counseling them in their perplexities. Above all she was an example to them of how a

Poor Lady should live. She urged them to be bright mirrors "to their own sisters whom the Lord has called to our way of life that they in turn might be a mirror and example to those living in the world" (TestCl 19-20). In such concrete ways, Clare's contemplating of Jesus formed her and the sisters for the work of evangelization both inside and outside the community.

Personal example is one form of this contemplative/apostolic action. But it is not the most profound one. What Clare knew was that a contemplative life, just because it is a *life*, affects the vitality of the whole Body of Christ. Nothing special needs to be said or done; faithful living builds up the body. In powerful imagery, Clare urges Agnes to this demanding way of being contemplative, urging her and her sisters to be co-workers "of God himself and a support of the weak members of His ineffable body" (3LAg 8).

Conclusion

In the preceding sections we have looked in turn at each element of Clare's vision of Franciscan contemplation: her poverty, her life in community, her spirit of apostolic prayer. The uniqueness of the Franciscan charism and of Clare's gift lies in the way these particular elements interrelate. Each gives specific shape to the others. Here we can only indicate some of the ways in which this is true, allowing the reader to discover others.

Radical poverty is the cornerstone of the Franciscan charism, something Clare symbolizes by placing the chapter on poverty at the heart and center of her Rule. The poverty she describes is made possible by life in community. Without each other the Poor Sisters could not risk such absolute non-ownership; no one could do it alone. As community they need to stand guard together over the treasure that Francis had entrusted to them.

The spirit of minority is also evidenced by their relationships within community. As sisters they relate to each other in noncompetitive ways, building each other up in love rather than trying to outdo each other. Each strives to serve the others. Those entrusted with office lead the way as servants of all. Each sister experiences, too, the poverty of her own faults and weaknesses as well as those of her sisters, exposed to each other within the small space of enclosed community. Here the acceptance of poverty is expressed in the alms of mutual forgiveness.

Poverty also gives form to the life of prayer, which is another central element in Franciscan contemplative living. It makes possible the faith that is the bedrock of contemplation, the trust that waits in patience, and the perseverance in dark emptiness that is the contemplatives' daily bread. Their love of being little in the eyes of God enabled Clare and her sisters to

be content with prayer's lack of efficiency and productivity; they would not have to justify their life's work through personal accomplishment. Having nothing to call their own, they had to seek their sufficiency in God.

To the wider community the concern of the sisters reached out in special ways to those who were poorest. We know how the sick, the needy, the troubled, made their way down Assisi's hills to find help in the small shelter of San Damiano's.

Leadership in a poor community does not become a possession, something to be held on to by the few. If an abbess is no longer serving the needs of the sisters, they should elect another. Positions of authority should be both accepted and relinquished in terms of humble service. In this same spirit of minority the abbess should consult the whole community, so that even the poorest, the youngest, the weakest are part of decision-making in matters that affect the whole community.

Life in community is nuanced by the sisters' call to contemplative living since that is their whole purpose in being together. United in mind and heart they form a community of solitude, coming together to be given to God and to the world and not primarily for forming bonds with each other. Their life in community, however, is nonetheless warm, since their union is meant to support each one's solitude, preventing it from becoming an escape from the interpersonal or degenerating into destructive loneliness.

Francis and Clare were given as apostles and contemplatives. Francis and his friars were apostolic contemplatives, their ministry having a kind of priority. Their life of contemplation was tested by their service. Clare and her sisters were contemplative apostles. Prayer had a certain priority in their lives, and any ministry they might be called to undertake within or without the community was discerned in terms of its effect on their life of contemplation.

Finally, the call to contemplative living colored their poverty as well as their life in community. Without a willingness to be empty of clear concepts, satisfying self-reflection, self-directed activity, contemplation is aborted before it can even begin. Contemplatives who are in touch with their poverty and minority know that prayer is not about themselves, but about God.

Another insight of the Franciscan charism is that contemplative/apostolic life is nuanced by community. Prayer for both friars and sisters has a strong communal element. They come together to encourage each other in prayer. Even their going apart into greater solitude is discerned by community and involves return to community. Francis's Rule for Hermitages with its exchange of roles between "mothers" and "sons" makes this clear. Clare's sisters lived aspects of this Rule, but within the close quarters of

enclosed community. Here the sisters prayed together the Liturgy of the Hours; here they heard the Word of God together. Community supported a generous provision of time for personal intimacy with God which nourished each and all. Growing union of mind and heart was to be the communal fruit of such contemplation. If, when they came together for prayer, they were not really one, then their sacrifice of praise was flawed. Gospel fidelity required that they leave their gift at the altar and go first to be reconciled. This is what they did in all the realism of everyday experience.

If Franciscan prayer does not issue in growing compassion for all, then contemplation is not authentic. It is no accident that Francis, having just received the stigmata, was made aware of Brother Leo's need for encouragement or that Clare was remembered by her sisters, not only for her contemplation, but for her love as their "sister and mother."

All of the above suggests that the Franciscan charism is a trinity of poverty, prayer, and community. It is the way these elements come together that forms the unique gift, the charism of Francis and Clare in the Church. As Franciscans we are invited to become that gift ourselves and to share it with the Church in our time.

Endnote

[1] Source for quotations from writings by and about Clare are taken from *Clare of Assisi, Early Documents*, ed. and trans. Regis J. Armstrong, OFM, Cap. (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 1993).

Francis and Clare were given as apostles and contemplatives. Francis and his friars were apostolic contemplatives. Clare and her sisters were contemplative apostles. (Marie Beha, OSC)

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CLARE, LIGHT FOR THE FUTURE

Sister Maryalice Pierce, OSC

Clare of Assisi is a light for the future, not only for Poor Clares, but for all members of the Franciscan family. Just as she was a light for people in her own time, she continues to give us insights as we immerse ourselves in the study of newly available documents by and about her and reflect on the heritage she has left us. In this paper I would like to show how Clare's light can guide us into the future as Franciscan women and men.

I will begin by looking at Clare as our light, move on to the legacy of our vocation in her light, and finally, consider what that vocation might mean for us and the Church in the future. This sounds presumptuous, of course. No one of us knows what the future holds; more often than not, it unfolds in ways we could never have imagined. Therefore, I don't claim to have answers or even a clear course of action for the future. What I hope to do is raise questions that challenge all of us both to hold firm to what we have been given in our vocation and to keep asking questions and seeking ways to live it more fully.

Clare as Light

While it seems redundant to discuss Clare as light, yet, it is important if we are to appreciate her impact on our lives. Evidently Pope Alexander IV thought this. At Clare's canonization he used this metaphor to sound her praises eloquently (cf. Proc; Bull of Canonization). What do we mean when we say that a person is a light? There are several dictionary definitions that we can apply: a light is a person who inspires or is admired, who is a pathway of illumination, who is filled with spiritual awareness, who is a way of looking at something. A light is someone who admits illumination.

How many times in the Process of Canonization do we read that Clare inspired her sisters and was admired by them? Clare's own sister, Beatrice, attested to this when she spoke of Clare's holiness. She said it consisted of: "virginity, humility, patience, and kindness; in the necessary correction and sweet admonition of her sisters; in the continuous application to her prayer and contemplation, . . . the fervor of her love of God, her desire for martyrdom, and, most especially, her love of the Privilege of Poverty" (Proc 12:6). She was, for her sisters, for the friars, and for all who encountered her, a pathway to illumination: a way to Jesus, the Light.

In her letters to Agnes of Prague she constantly refers to her source of light, Jesus the Way (1LAg 8-11; 2LAg 20; 3LAg 11-16; 4LAg 15-26). Clare's whole thrust was one of spiritual awareness; she told her sisters to keep their minds always on spiritual things (RCl 8:2). She told Agnes: "But because one thing is necessary, I bear witness to that one thing and encourage you, for love of Him to Whom you have offered yourself as a holy and pleasing sacrifice, that you always be mindful of your resolution like another Rachel always seeing your beginning" (2LAg 10-11). Clare modeled this advice well. We read in Benvenuta's witness statement that she was not given to idle talk, but spoke only what was necessary (Proc 2: 10). Her attentiveness to prayer was attested by several of the sisters during her canonization process (Proc 1:7; 2:9; 10:3). They said that there was a special glow about her when she came from prayer (Proc 2:17). They cited times when she remained in the choir after the others had left to continue communing with Christ (Proc 14:2). Clare counseled in her Testament that the sisters should study Jesus the mirror so intently that they themselves would become mirrors, not only for each other, but for others outside the monastery (TestCl 18-20).

The Legacy of Our Vocation in Clare's Light

Sister Frances Teresa, OSC, in her book, *This Living Mirror,*[1] portrays Clare as a totally human person. Her description of Clare's journey from darkness into light helps me appreciate Clare as one who struggled, not one who was born perfect. First of all, Clare was born in an age of darkness and she couldn't help but be deeply affected by this. There was war, struggle for power, and a class system in which the Church, as well as the government, was engaged. Because the city of Assisi was enmeshed in this struggle, so was Clare's own family. The men in her household were part of the fight to defend the nobility from the rising merchant class, and they were caught up in the struggle between the emperor and the pope. Clare herself would have aided their efforts, had she consented to marry some important political ally instead of choosing to live the radical gospel life that Francis preached.

Clare was engaged in a struggle between darkness and light. Her personality was a combination of her father's Lombardy strength and vigor and her mother's Frankish sensitivity, gentility, and religious tendency. For Clare, conversion was a matter of reconciling these different gifts. Implied in her strong objection to becoming abbess was a fear of her own inclination to exert control. We know she had a strong will from the tenacious way that she, in the face of strong ecclesiastical opposition, held onto the ideal of poverty given to her by Francis. What is seen in retrospect as virtue, could also have become stubbornness and "self-will." It was both her virtue and her vice. She had to accept her weakness so that the Holy Spirit could transform it in making her holy.

Clare was raised in the midst of nobility and wealth. Washing the feet of her sisters and even kissing them was her way of overcoming her cultural refinement as much as it was her way of imitating Christ, the servant. Her insistence in her Rule that there was to be no class system at San Damiano and that even the youngest were to be consulted in all important decisions of the community indicates her desire to move beyond the limited view of her cultural milieu and even the view of religious orders of her time. Clare had to struggle with inherited and learned limitation. She had seen the results of the division and injustice of the class system in the poor who huddled in the streets of Assisi just below her home. She made a clear choice of poverty in order to combat the prevailing system. But none of this came easily to her. It grew out of life experience and struggle, combined with prayer and discernment.

Darkness lurked in Clare's inner spirit as well as in her inherited gifts and in the world around her. Holiness, especially for women in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, was shrouded in darkness. Women were looked upon as sources of evil and temptation. Medieval women themselves tended to believe this. Therefore the road to holiness for them lay in punishing their bodies by inflicting extreme fasts and penance.[2] We read the stories of her hair shirts, her extreme fasts, and long vigils of prayer in her zeal for living the gospel (Cf. Proc 7:4; 4:6). Yet, as Clare aged she moved beyond this. Her gazing on Christ led her to value deeply all of God's gifts, including the gifts of her body.

In her third letter to Agnes of Prague and in her Rule, Clare cautions a temperate view, one allowing for human nature and its differences. She says: "But our flesh is not bronze, nor is our strength that of stone" (3LAg 38). Indeed, Clare expresses a sensitivity to human weakness when she stresses that the abbess should provide adequate clothing for the climate

and needs of individual sisters (RCl 2:16) and allow enough food for those unable to fast according to the custom (RCl 3:10-11). While she includes legal restrictions from the Rules of Innocent and Hugolino, she softens them with her learned understanding of human nature. Total silence becomes: "They may communicate whatever is necessary always and everywhere, briefly, and in a low tone of voice" (RCl 5:4). While Clare incorporates in her Rule the prescriptions of Innocent and Hugolino regarding enclosure, both in leaving the monastery and allowing others to enter the enclosure, she allows for "useful, reasonable, evident and approved purpose"(RCl 2:12; 12:11). The abbess is "sister, mother, and servant" to the sisters and they, in turn are expected to be so for each other (RCl 10:4). Over and over Clare shows the maturity of wisdom that has been acquired through experience over her lifetime.

Even poverty, the core of Clare's commitment, deepened in meaning as she matured; it found its fulfillment in being stripped of selfishness and sin, recognizing that our greatest poverty is embracing our human nature as Christ did, becoming, not less human, but more human. Poverty meant detachment from all that was not Christ in order to be united with him completely. Clare's constant gazing on Christ opened up a new vision of holiness; it was a focus on Christ that included the whole of humankind and of creation. She found him in each sister and in each person who came into her life. Sister Angeluccia tells us that "she reminded them [the serving sisters] to praise God when they saw beautiful trees, flowers, and bushes; and, likewise, always to praise Him for and in all things when they saw all peoples and creatures" (Proc 14:9). Once Clare's vision was focused there was no going back; her strong personality would see it through to the end of her life when she said to her sister, "Do you see, O child, the King of Glory Whom I see?" (CL 46). Clare not only saw the Light; she became the Light; she became Christ.

Clare expects us to take up the same challenge. Her urging her sisters in her Testament to become mirrors reflecting Christ the mirror to each other and to those outside the monastery was another way of saying that we must be lights, reflecting the light of Christ. As individuals and as communities, we are to mirror Clare's light and the light of Christ to all who look upon us. Our vocation is to be beacons, lighting up the way for our Church and our world. This can happen only after we have confronted our darkness, embraced it, and allowed it to be overcome by the Light of Christ.

Our Vocation in the Future in the Light of Clare

What do we mean by the future and how can we begin to talk about it? A number of years ago I participated in a Futurology workshop. The group

of nine participants spent days trying to depict how the community would look in twenty years, fifty years, one hundred years. The thesis of Futurology is that we hold the future within us—our attitudes and our actions today influence what will happen in the future. An important part of looking into the future is to be free in our thinking, free to dream. For us believers in the workings of the Holy Spirit it is being open to "God's dream for us."

Francis and Clare, because their lives were so focused on Christ and so uncluttered, were natural dreamers. Francis's dream of holding up the Church and his dream of Poor Ladies one day inhabiting San Damiano and Clare's dream of a new form of life are examples of their visions for the future. Dreaming of the future must have fertile ground to take root and grow. It must be nourished by the courage to put aside what is comfortable and to be moved by Divine inspiration. There must be realism in the dreams even as they flow freely from the depths of faith and hope and our relationship with God. If most of our community is aging, if there are many sick, if we are rattling around in buildings that are too large and that we are unable to maintain, if we have had few vocations in the past ten years, we have to face these facts and look at our future in that light. This need not be depressing, although it will require some dying and rising.

Let us be dreamers like the prophets and Francis and Clare. Let us look at our present situation and take heart. The gift of our vocation is no less real today than it was when Clare first heard God's call or when we first heard God's call. While we have not lost our first joy and fervor in our vocation, we have come to know it in a deeper and more real way. Let us peel off the outer skin, the nonessentials, and look at what it is: to walk in the footprints of Francis and Clare, to live in a way that is counter-cultural in order to witness by our very lives what is basic to gospel life. This is what is meant by constant conversion. How can we live our lives more deeply today, at the eve of the new millennium, so that like Clare, we will reflect Christ so brightly to those around us that they will have to examine their own lives in that light?

It is the authentic living of our vocation that will attract others to join us. In the end, it isn't the "romantic" elements of religious life that hold candidates; it is the central values that they see lived in our midst. Ever so often when someone new enters or visits our community she will ask: "Why do you do it this way?" or "Have you ever considered this"? We need to listen to such questions and ask them of ourselves. How does a given practice support a gospel way of living? Is it life-giving now? We cannot let ourselves get stuck in a mode of action just because we are used to it. This is death-dealing, not life-giving.

In a talk I heard recently by Bishop Morneau, he said that in order for change to occur there are three steps: first we must change the way we look at things; then we must change our attitudes; finally we must change our behavior.[3] The diversity in our communities makes change difficult for us. Yet, even small changes can make a big difference in freeing us to attend to the important things.

Clare and Francis dared to ask questions. They questioned the forms of religious life and practices of their day; they questioned practices in the Church itself. For example, Francis set out on a kind of campaign regarding respectful care of the Eucharist. Clare joined that campaign when she sewed linens for use at the Eucharistic celebration and sent them as gifts to the local churches. They both had new ideas about what Holy Poverty meant. It was a radical departure from the thinking of the religious groups and even of the Church itself at that time.

Clare's conviction about the role of an abbess was totally innovative: a servant, mother, and sister, to whom the sisters could easily turn in their need (TestCl 65-66). Her concept of government was innovative, as well. She consulted the sisters in all matters that had a bearing on the community (RCl 17). She wanted the abbess to model love and respect (TestCl 62). Francis and Clare started a whole new movement in the Church and in history. Their vision was uncluttered and focused on Christ.

Clare was a light in her time precisely because she struggled against the darkness in her inner self and in the world around her and overcame it. She knew that the suffering of initiating change was part of God's redemptive plan for her. Gazing on Christ in the gospels and in each person, Clare kept her focus: unwavering attention to the essentials. Her concern about poverty came out of her concentration on the Poor Christ. Clare did away with the nonessential things. She wanted to be stripped of all that encumbered her.

We cannot take refuge in externals, even those that make us look and feel good. We need to sift out things that do not support simple gospel living, things that take time and energy but have little to do with our vocation. This will free us to focus more intently on Christ, "to gaze on him, consider him, contemplate him . . . so that [we may] share always and forever the glory of the kingdom of heaven in place of earthly and passing things" (2LAg 20).

As I write this I remember the gospel story of the of the royal official who came to Jesus to beg him to cure his son (John 4: 43-54). In a commentary on this gospel, Carroll Stuhlmueller points out that everyone who saw the man could tell how full of joy he was because he truly believed that Jesus had cured his son. His walk was more lively, his face was lit up, and

a demeanor of enthusiasm for life told all who saw him that he was filled with faith and hope.[4] Do people know, when they come in contact with me, that I possess a priceless treasure? Is there a glow about me? Do our communities reflect the light of Christ? What do people hear when they call us or come to our door—a person full of the joy of Christ or one who seems weary of it all?

In Matthew's gospel we read: "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. We do not light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket. . . . Your light must shine before all so that they may see goodness in your acts and give praise to God" (Mt. 5:13-15). If we are truly living the gospel form of life that Clare modeled for us, our light will shine far and wide and cause others to take notice. We will become places of healing, life-giving places, like San Damiano in Clare's day, where people come in their time of necessity to seek refuge for their pain and distress. Our life of prayer and conversion must witness to the reality of God's love and presence in our Church and in our world.

The future for us lies in giving the kind of witness that comes from looking intently on Christ, Mirror and Light, and truly becoming lights for the world, lights that are sources of healing and refreshment to those who come seeking. This depends on our ability to cling faithfully to the essentials of our vocation while letting go of the nonessentials which clutter our vision. It depends on our freedom to become dreamers and prophets—people with our feet firmly planted in the real world, aware of our darkness, but with our eyes always fixed on Jesus, our Light. Clare, the perfect image of that light, has shown us clearly how to move into the future "with swift pace, light step, unswerving feet, so that even [our] steps stir up no dust, . . . [going] forward securely, joyfully, and swiftly on the path of prudent happiness" (2LAg 12-13).

Endnotes

[1] Sister Frances Teresa, OSC, *This Living Mirror* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books)

[2] Ingrid J. Peterson, O.S.F., *Clare of Assisi, A Biographical Study* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1993) 213-214.

[3] Bishop Morneau, *The Newman Lecture* at the Oratory in Rock Hill, SC (Mar. 9, 1996).

[4] Carroll Stuhlmueller, CP, *Biblical Meditations for Lent* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978) 53.

About Our Contributors

Thomas Barton, OSF, a member of the Franciscan Brothers of Brooklyn, is a graduate of The Franciscan Institute. He has most recently been serving in HIV ministry in New York City. In August he will return to India, where he will teach Franciscan studies.

Marie Beha, OSC, is a member of the Poor Clare community in Greenville, South Carolina. She serves on the editorial board of *The Cord* and her biographical profile is featured in this issue on page 180.

Frances Teresa Downing, OSC, is a member of the community of Poor Clares at Arundel, West Sussex, England. She is the author of *Living the Incarnation: Praying with Francis and Clare of Assisi*, a book on Franciscan spirituality, translator of *Clare of Assisi* by Marco Bartoli (DLT) and *The Charism of the Founder* by Antonio Romano (Paulist Press). At present, she serves her community as vicaress and part-time cook while also writing.

Lezlie S. Knox is a doctoral student at the Medieval Institute, Notre Dame, Indiana. Her dissertation is on the intellectual life of the Franciscan nuns of the Second Order. During the past academic year, she has been doing archival research in Italy.

Maryalice Pierce, OSC, is a Poor Clare sister of Greenville, South Carolina. Her article was originally presented as the keynote address at a federation meeting of the Poor Clares in Andover, Massachusetts, April 24-30, 1996.

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Michael is a friar of St. Bonaventure Province, Chicago, and is associate professor at the Franciscan Institute of St. Bonaventure University. His background includes formation and provincial administration. He has given retreats and lectured on a variety of Franciscan themes.

Date: Saturday, September 28, 1996

Place: St. Anthony Shrine, Boston

Time: 10:00am - 4:00pm

Cost: $10.00
Pre-registration is required by September 21.

For further information contact:

Violet Grennan, OSF
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ON THE FRANCISCAN CIRCUIT
COMING EVENTS 1996

Sunday, July 14-Thursday, August 1

"Living in our Franciscan Experience" (Life Program). Cost: $950 includes retreat, seminars, room and board. At the Fullerton Cenacle, Chicago, IL. Contact Madonna Hoying, SFP, 2473 Banning Road, Cincinnati, OH 45239, ph. 513-522-7516.

Saturday, August 3-Saturday, August 10

"The Gospels as Foundation of Franciscan Life," preached retreat and directed retreat. Ramona Miller, OSF, Margaret Pirkl, OSF, Carol Rennie, OSB, Linda Wieser, OSF, Jude Winkler, OFM, Conv. Tau Center, 511 Hilbert St., Winona, MN 55987; ph. 507-454-2993; FAX 507-453-0919.

Thursday, August 15-Saturday, August 17

Franciscan Federation annual Conference (See ad, p. 202.)

Sunday, August 25-Saturday, August 31

A retreat on the San Damiano Crucifix by Andre Cirino, OFM. $185. At Stella Maris Retreat Center, Skaneateles, NY. Contact: Stella Maris Retreat Center, ph. 315-685-6836.

Sunday, September 17

Region 3 **Franciscan Walk for AIDS.** 6th Annual AIDS Walk, Chicago. Contact: AIDS Walk Chicago, 909 West Belmont, Chicago, OL 60657

Saturday, September 28

A Day of Recollection with Michael Blastic, OFM, Conv. at St. Anthony Shrine, 100 Arch St., Boston, MA 02107-2278. (See ad, p. 206.)

Sunday, September 29-Tuesday, October 1

"Facing the Christ Incarnate," at Mount St. Francis, Colorado Springs, CO; sponsored by the Franciscan Federation. Contact: The Franciscan Federation, 650 Jackson St., NE, Washington, DC 20017, ph. 202-529-2334; FAX 202-529-7016.

Sunday, October 13-Tuesday, October 15

"Facing the Christ Incarnate," at Franciscan Retreat Center, Portland, OR; contact the Francsiscan Federation (see above).

Friday, October 25-Sunday, October 27

Praying with Franciscan Women Mystics, Ingrid Peterson, OSF; at The Franciscan Center, Andover, MA. Contact: Franciscan Center, 459 River Road, Andover, MA 01810, ph. 508-851-3391; FAX 503-858-0675.

Thursday, October 31-Sunday, November 3

"The Enkindling of Love: Bonaventure's Triple Way," Regis J. Armstrong, OFM, Cap., at the Tau Center, Winona, MN (see above for contact information).

Thursday, October 31-Sunday, November 3

Franciscan Connection at Mount St. Francis, Dubuque, IA. Speakers: Beatrice Eichten, OSF and Nancy Schreck, OSF. Contact: Jean Schwieters, OSF, 727 E. Margaret, St. Paul, MN 55106, ph. 612-772-1740 or Judi Angst, Box 4900, Rochester, MN 55903, ph. 507-282-7441.

Writings of Saint Francis

Adm	Admonitions
BenLeo	Blessing for Brother Leo
CantSol	Canticle of Brother Sun
EpAnt	Letter to St. Anthony
EpCler	Letter to the Clergy
EpCust	Letter to the Custodians
1EpFid	First Letter to the Faithful
2EpFid	Second Letter to the Faithful
EpLeo	Letter to Brother Leo
EpMin	Letter to a Minister
EpOrd	Letter to the Entire Order
EpRect	Letter to the Rulers of the Peoples
ExhLD	Exhortation to the Praise of God
ExhPD	Exhortation to Poor Ladies
ExpPat	Prayer Inspired by the Our Father
FormViv	Form of Life for St. Clare
1Fragm	Fragment of other Rule I
2Fragm	Fragment of other Rule II
LaudDei	Praises of God
LaudHor	Praises to be said at all the Hours.
OffPass	Office of the Passion
OrCruc	Prayer before the Crucifix
RegB	Later Rule
RegNB	Earlier Rule
RegEr	Rule for Hermitages
SalBMV	Salutation of the Blessed Virgin
SalVirt	Salutation of the Virtues
Test	Testament
TestS	Testament written in Siena
UltVol	Last Will written for St. Clare
VPLaet	Dictate on True and Perfect Joy

Writings of Saint Clare

1LAg	First Letter to Agnes of Prague
2LAg	Second Letter to Agnes of Prague
3LAg	Third Letter to Agnes of Prague
4LAg	Fourth Letter to Agnes of Prague
LEr	Letter to Ermentrude of Bruges
RCl	Rule of Clare
TestCl	Testament of Clare
BCl	Blessing of Clare

Early Franciscan Sources

1Cel	First Life of St. Francis by Thomas of Celano
2Cel	Second Life of St. Francis by Thomas of Celano
3Cel	Treatise on the Miracles by Thomas of Celano
AP	Anonymous of Perugia
CL	Legend of Clare
CSD	Consideration of the Stigmata
Fior	Fioretti
JdV	Witness of Jacque de Vitry
LM	Major Life of St. Francis by Bonaventure
LMin	Minor Life of St. Francis by Bonaventure
LP	Legend of Perugia
L3S	Legend of the Three Companions
Proc	Acts of the Process of Canonization of St. Clare
SC	Sacrum Commercium
SP	Mirror of Perfection