St. Clare's Expression of the Spirit and Rule of St. Francis

Synthesis of a Workshop Edited by Sandra Rofe, O.S.C. (Brisbane), and Agnes Van Baer, O.S.C. (Melbourne)

Our aim in this workshop will be to see how St. Clare expressed and made her own the spirit and rule of Francis, both in her own life and in the spiritual heritage she left for those who were to follow her. For Clare, as for Francis, the rule was spiritual and personal; and above all it was a life: the Gospel life. And it is in her personal living of it that she reflects the spirit of Francis. He himself was the first to recognize "that one and the same spirit had led the brothers and the Poor Ladies out of the world" (2Cel 204). And certainly, through Francis, Clare did discover a whole new world.

Wherever possible, we shall listen to Clare herself speaking, so that she may emerge as a real person; and then take time to reflect on her Testament as a concise and comprehensive summary of her spirit and ideals and the only text readily available to all of us here today.

Clare loved to describe herself as "the little plant" of St. Francis, and the epithet is a very expressive one. But from seven and a half centuries away it could perhaps too easily suggest an ordered and tranquil planting, nurturing and growing to maturity in a rarefied atmosphere free from hassle or difficulty. The reality, in fact, was often very different, for Clare had to go through a slow and sometimes painful process of growth, with numerous setbacks and constant new beginnings. And of course it was the new beginnings that made the adventure so worthwhile and its outcome so assured.

Clare was trying to establish a contemplative way of life based on the simplicity of the Gospel. Like Francis, she wanted those who joined her, and those who would follow later, to do so out of love and not as an observance of rules and regulations. Their life was to be a personal commitment to the person of Christ, whom she constantly held up to them as a mirror and model. She writes to Blessed Agnes of Prague: "Look into this mirror every day, and study your own face in it.... In the beginning of the mirror behold the poverty of the Babe who was wrapped in swaddling clothes and placed in the manger... In the center of the mirror consider the humility which walks side by side with poverty, the countless labors and hardships He bore for the redemption of the human race.... In the end of the mirror contemplate the unspeakable love which prompted Him to suffer on the tree of the cross and, there to die the most shameful kind of death."

And again she insists: "Behold Him, consider Him, contemplate Him, and desire to be like Him." This, in essence, was to be her vocation within the church.

It is impossible to sum up Francis's spirit in a few words. But we have heard much about it during these days; and each of us has been moved by that same spirit. That is why we are here today. As we come to know Francis we find that he was no different from any other healthy and passionate young boy of his time, with his dreams of knighthood and chivalry. Being the son of a well-to-do merchant would have given him some degree of assurance that he could realize these dreams, as money and influence were no object. We have heard about his gradual conversion. Francis woke up, slowly but surely. He was given a tiny glimpse of truth, and it was enough to change radically his whole way of life. This truth was the Good News and the person of Christ. It didn't change his naturally warm and loving personality, but it infused it with light to make it transparent. Everything within him responded with loving gratitude; he was overcome by it and wanted to let it consume him completely. What Francis saw against a background of power and wealth was the true meaning of poverty, the poverty of the Gospel, the first Beatitude - the happiness of those who know their need of God - and from that time forward he tried to live the Sermon on the Mount; and in the process he became an authentic Christian.

Clare's background was different from that of Francis. She was born into an aristocratic family, which immediately put her on a different level of society. Although wealth and power were also very much a part of her daily life, this did not have the same effect on her as it had on Francis. And perhaps this is why she does not incorporate Francis's prohibition of the use of money into her own rule later on.

From early childhood Clare had a loving concern for the poor, as we find mentioned in Celano's Life: "She gladly stretched out her hand to the poor and from the abundance of her house supplied the wants of many." She would have learned this concern for the poor from her mother, Ortolana, who was a generous and pious woman. And such generosity would have been a common response among the aristocratic women of the time who were held in great esteem for their piety and almsgiving. But with Clare it didn't remain just a social grace or duty. She must have been longing for a much deeper expression of this compassion which she felt in her heart.

Let us take a closer look at the lives of these two young people at the point where they begin to converge: in the year 1206 when Clare is actually only twelve years old. The incident is well known from Celano, and Clare recalls it this way in her Testament:

Almost immediately after his conversion, before had had as yet either brothers or companions, when our blessed father set about repairing the Church of San Damiano

where, touched by divine consolation which so completely filled his soul, he had been moved to withdraw entirely from the world, he uttered in very great joy and in the light of the Holy Spirit that prophecy in our regard which the Lord afterwards fulfilled. For, at that time, mounting the wall of the said church, he called out in a loud voice in the French tongue to some poor people who happened to be hear: "Come and help me in the building of this monastery, for here will dwell ladies whose good name and holy life will glorify our heavenly Father throughout His holy church."

And a little further on: "The most high heavenly Father deigned to enlighten my heart by His mercy and grace to do penance after the example and teaching of our most blessed father Francis, shortly after his conversion."

So the two orders were conceived together in the mind of Francis "before he had as yet either brother or companions." The prophecy came first; Clare came afterwards. And it was not Francis who sought Clare out, but the Lord who inspired them both and brought the inspiration to fruition. Francis foresaw and prophesied what *the Lord* afterwards fulfilled. It was probably another three years before they actually met, at least on this new footing; and in that meeting the prophecy and the vision came into clearer perspective as they began to realize what it was all about. This sudden recognition in a single vision of what was and what might be is, after all, the gift that the Spirit is continually imparting to the prophet.

Can you imagine the joy these two young people must have experienced when they realized that they understood and were being drawn by the one Spirit? This was one of those great moments of recognition when mutual awareness is born, and it led Francis and Clare into a deep awareness of the reality of Christ, expressing itself in thankfulness and wonder. They shared the same vision of the poor, crucified Christ; they were both graced with extraordinary generosity and compassion; they both loved very deeply; and their eyes were firmly and continually fixed on Christ as their brother and model, their Way to the Father.

Francis wanted nothing else but to live the Gospel. His was a new way of seeing Christ and of loving Him, of making the fraternal spirit of the Gospel a reality and of living out the minority and the poverty of the Son of God whom love made man, in a continual new beginning of the life of penance. Clare, too, wanted to live in this newness of life, accepting life always new from God's hand, at peace with God, at home in this world and trusting Him to provide all good things, and so finding entrance into the kingdom of God through the Good News of the New Covenant, which is purely and simply putting on Christ. Clare writes in her Testament: "The Son of God became for us the Way; and that Way our blessed father Francis, His true disciple and faithful follower, has shown and taught us by word and example."

It was about six years after the first encounter, in 1212, that Clare finally

came to live at San Damiano, after a very brief period spent with the Benedictines, first at Bastia, then at Sant'Angelo di Panzo on the slopes of Monte Subasio, where, as Celano is careful to record, "her soul was not fully at rest." Clare herself passes over the experience with great discretion: "Before this, we had tarried in another place, but only for a little while." Grateful as she was for this hospitality and initiation into the religious life, the structures of monasticism were no more acceptable to her than to Francis. What she wanted was a much more simple life-style, free from the pleasures imposed by the possession of material goods and based on the poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ and his most holy mother. The rest of her life was to be one continuous struggle to be allowed to live this with the approval of the church in the special way marked out for her by Francis.

It was right here at the beginning that Francis drew up for Clare and her few sisters a Form of Life, now largely lost except for that portion which – as we shall see later – Clare was to incorporate into her own rule, but no doubt similar to what had already been verbally approved for Francis and his companions by Innocent III. It was also at this time that he imposed on her the office and title of abbess and began to temper her asceticism. Clare promised obedience to him, and he promised to her and her sisters the

same care and solicitude which he had for his own brothers.

In the early halcyon days this was enough. Francis and Clare shared the enormous enthusiasm of this new life, though they lived it out in different settings. They also shared a deep sense of gratitude to God for the gift of their vocation. As Clare expresses it in her Testament: "Among the many graces which we have received and daily continue to receive from the giver of all good gifts, the Father of mercies and for which we should give deepest thanks to the Lord of glory, great indeed is the grace of our vocation. And the greater and more perfect this grace is, the more are we indebted to the Lord for it."

However, as new communities started to spring up within the next few years throughout Umbria and Tuscany, some more definite guidelines were necessary if the new movement was to be saved from fragmentation and eventual disintegration. The tenor of life at San Damiano was still not sufficiently well organized to be passed on to others who were looking there for help and inspiration, given the inadequate means of communication, even though Clare did send several of her early companions to help out in other monasteries. Moreover, the new order had as yet no official recognition from the church; nor had the Order of Friars Minor, on which it was dependent and which was also in a critical stage of its development. So the responsibility for some common form of organization fell to the papal legate, Cardinal Hugolino, who in 1218 was appointed cardinal protector of the new order. He felt that the situation needed a man's hand, and preferably that of a canonist who could really understand the way of

life of the "Poor Ladies" and articulate it in a logical workable fashion. Accordingly, in 1219 he drew up the first official rule of the order, which was virtually the rule of St. Benedict, with certain additions of his own. Written in a juridical tone quite alien to the spirit of Francis and Clare, it must have gone down like a lead balloon, when it was presented to the community at San Damiano. It begins this way: "It is necessary that all true religious and approved institutes conform to certain norms, measures and determined disciplinary laws; for whoever desires to live a religious life without endeavouring to observe with diligence an upright rule of conduct under orderly discipline departs from the way of righteousness. And there is a greater risk of faltering where a definite and stable foundation, demanded by the virtue of discretion, has not been placed."

It continues: "In order that your life, built and founded on Christ, may become like a holy temple of the Lord, and in imitation of those who, following in the footsteps of the saints, served the Lord without fault, you may attain to the prize of a supernal vocation, we give you the rule of St. Benedict. . . . It will in no way run counter to those provisions for living your life which were given to you by us and which you had taken as proper

to your way of life."

The "provisions" mentioned in the last sentence, which for Clare must have provided the one touch of relief in such a ponderous formulation, were the counsel of Francis which Hugolino had already approved, and the "Privilege of Poverty" granted by Innocent III in 1215 and later to be reconfirmed by by Hugolino when he became pope as Gregory IX. This privilege was an exemption from the ownership of property and fixed revenues which had up till then guaranteed the security and livelihood of the monastic orders and which Clare saw as an encumbrance to a life of total dependence on God in gospel littleness or minority.

The decisive clause of this document reads: "Therefore, in accordance with your request, we hereby confirm with apostolic favour your resolution concerning most high poverty, and by the authority of these present letters ordain that no man shall henceforth compel you to receive

any possessions."

So, what Hugolino intended to do and actually did was to provide for Clare and her new order the canonical coverage of the Benedictine rule in view of the Fourth Lateran Council's requirement that any new orders adopt one of the three ancient rules, while at the same time leaving her spirit free to evolve in the way that Francis was opening up to her under divine inspiration. For her, as for him, there was to be a slow process of growth and of tension between the demands of the letter and the flight of the spirit.

And indeed, just about four years later, after the promulgation of Hugolino's rule, Clare was able to draw on the rule of Francis, approved in

November 1223, to highlight things which had been passed over in silence by Hugolino, or to adapt that which was out of harmony with the spirit of Francis. It was surely a case of practice preceding the law, as it was not until some twenty-four years later, with the rule drawn up by Pope Innocent IV in 1247, that the sisters were authorized to make profession according to the rule of St. Francis instead of that of St. Benedict. But there was real disappointment with this rule on other grounds: from Clare because it did not uphold her ideals of gospel poverty and simplicity of life, but rather encouraged stable sources of income, for example: "It shall be licit for you to have in common and to retain freely rents and possessions"; and from the friars because of the excessive demands it made on them with regard to the care of the sisters - even to the extent of insisting that the chaplain and lay brothers assigned to this work should promise obedience to the abbess, making a vow of stability of place! So there was a general outcry, and in face of the opposition it occasioned on all sides, Innocent finally declared in 1250 that it was not his intention to impose the new rule as an obligation.

This left the say open for Clare to draw up her own rule, the provisions of which had no doubt been gradually evolving in practice since 1223. This was approved by Pope Innocent in person when he visited Clare at San Damiano on 9 August 1253, two days before her death. In the Bull of confirmation (Solet annuere) Innocent refers to the rule as "the form of life given you by the blessed Francis and freely accepted by you, according to which you should live together in unity of spirit and in the profession of highest poverty." After a chronic illness of some twenty-eight years, Clare could die happy, her life's work accomplished. She ended her life with another prayer of gratitude on her lips, this time for the gift of life itself – a prayer expressing her utter simplicity to which her forty years of gospel living had led her: "I thank you, God, for having created me."

Clare, like Francis, saw her life in retrospect as divided into two periods: "When I was in the midst of the vanities of the world," and: "After the Lord

enlightened my heart do do penance."

Penance, as *metanoia* and continual conversion – turning away from self and to God – was to be their and our basic life attitude. It was the way into the kingdom of God which must then be proclaimed to all men. Clare and her sisters chose to do this in the more silent way of prayer and presence of the Lord, while Francis and his brothers also undertook the external apostolate of being sent out on mission to preach the Good News. Just as for Francis what had previously been bitter was turned to sweetness when he embraced the leper, so too Clare, looking back from her deathbed over a long life, could tell the friars who were with her: "Ever since I have known the grace of my Lord Jesus Christ through Francis His servant, no suffering has troubled me, no penance has been too hard, no illness too burdensome" (Celano).

We read in the Process of Canonization that Francis, aided by Hugolino and the community of sisters, prevailed upon Clare to temper her asceticism to some extent. And certainly, after the excessive initial austerities, she learned and advocated moderation in the practice of corporal penances, relying more on the basic spiritual aspects of gospel penance and conversion.

She writes to Agnes of Prague on the subject of fasting: "Our flesh is not of brass, nor is our strength that of stone; but we are frail and subject to every bodily weakness. Therefore, I beg you to refrain from any indiscreet and impossible austerity in the fasting you have undertaken; and I beseech you in the Lord that by your life you praise God and render reasonable service to Him; and let your sacrifice be ever seasoned with wisdom" (Third Letter).

This "seasoning with wisdom" is certainly a distinctive feature of Clare's spirit and rule. It is interesting to reflect that she was the first woman to draw up a rule for religious life in the church. This she did with the texts of Benedict, Hugolino, Innocent and Francis, at hand or at least in mind. And she has left us a document and a way of life that is flexible, alive and personal, with its constant appeal to "the Spirit of the Lord and His holy working," its deep respect for the individual inspiration and initiative of the sisters, an accentuated sense of fraternal communion and the full participation of the sisters in the preoccupations and welfare of the monastery. Some juridical norms from the two popes and Benedict are retained; but the central and most prominent place is given to what are for her the most vital aspects of gospel living as Francis had revealed them to her by word and example and as she had imbibed them through more than forty years religious life in community. So we would expect to find emphasis on fraternal love, penance and conversion, poverty of spirit and minority, simplicity of life, loyalty to the church - and this gospel life to be lived "as strangers and pilgrims in this world" in joy and thankfulness, all "for the love of our Lord Jesus Christ and His most holy mother."

Clare abandons the stern and juridical opening of Hugolino's rule and substitutes the first sentences of that of Francis, stressing the family of sisters who are to live the Gospel of Christ by means of the evangelical counsels in loyalty and obedience to the church and to Francis and his successors. Likewise, her rule ends with the same renewal of the promise of fidelity to the Gospel: "... that always subject and submissive to the same holy church, firm in the Catholic faith, we may forever observe the poverty and humility of our Lord Jesus Christ and his most holy mother, and the holy Gospel which we have solemnly promised. Amen."

At the very heart of the document, as it were, Clare places what is closest to her own heart. Here she speaks of how her vocation came about. For us, too, it is the core and the most authentic expression of Clare; and still it is

direct from Francis. Here, placed side by side, are the two provisions that she most especially wanted to secure for those who would come after her: gospel poverty and spiritual ties with the First Order. In both cases she is quoting Francis: "But when the blessed father saw that we feared no poverty, toil, sorrow, humiliation, nor contempt of the world, but rather that we held these in great delight, moved by love he wrote for us a form of life as follows: 'Since by divine inspiration you have made yourselves daughters and handmaids of the most high and sovereign King, the heavenly Father, and have espoused yourselves to the Holy Spirit by the choice of a life according to the perfection of the holy Gospel, I will and promise for myself and my friars always to have for you as for them the same diligent care and special solicitude.' As long as he lived he faithfully kept this promise and he wished it always to be kept by the friars."

And again: "And that we and those who were to come after us might never fall away from the highest poverty which we had chosen, shortly before his death he again wrote for us his last will, saying: 'I, little Brother Francis, wish to follow the life and poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ most high, and of his most holy mother, and to persevere therein until the end. And I beseech you, my Ladies, and counsel you always to live in this most holy life and poverty. And watch yourselves well, lest by the counsel or advice of any one you ever depart from it in any way."

And then her own words: "And as I myself together with my sisters have ever been careful to observe the holy poverty which we have promised the Lord God and the blessed Francis, so likewise the abbesses who shall succeed me in office and all the sisters are bound to observe it inviolably to the end" (Rule, chapter 6).

Clare takes from the rule of Francis all that it contains for her of spirit and life; yet it is not a merely literal or slavish copying. She moves about with great freedom in view of the differing circumstances of the two orders, and at times in view also of her own different background. For example, she does not seem to share Francis's abhorrence of money, nor does she anywhere prohibit its use. So it is all the more significant that chapter 10, which contains the whole of the contemplative and ascetic ideal, the family spirit of mutual love and minority – in short, the whole spirit of the Second Order, is almost identical in both rules. It would be worth reading in its entirety to catch the echo and the heartbeat of the primitive life, which has kept it alive through seven and a half centuries:

The abbess shall admonish and visit her sisters and shall humbly and charitably correct them, not commanding them anything that is against their conscience and the form of our profession.

But let the sisters who are subject remember that it is for God's sake that they have given up their own will. Therefore, they are firmly bound to obey their abbesses in all things which they have promised the Lord to observe and which are not against their conscience

and our profession. But let the abbess show such great affability toward them that they may speak and act with her as mistresses with their handmaid, for thus it ought to be, that the abbess is the handmaid of all the sisters.

I admonish and exhort the sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ that they beware of all pride, vainglory, envy, covetousness, of all care and anxiety as to this world, of all detraction and murmuring, dissension and division. Let them ever be solicitous to maintain among themselves that unity of mutual charity which is the bond of perfection.

And those who do not know how to read should not wish to learn. But let them consider that they ought to desire above all to possess the spirit of the Lord and His holy operation, to pray always to Him with a clean heart, to have humility and patience in the time of trial and weakness, and to love those who persecute, blame and accuse us, because the Lord has said: "Blessed are they who suffer persecution for justice' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven... But he who shall persevere to the end, he shall be saved" (Rule, chapter 10).

Only on two points does Clare depart from Francis in this section of the rule: She omits his provision for recourse to the ministers, and gives added emphasis to the importance of mutual love, using the words of St. Paul to the Colossians: "Let them ever be careful to preserve among themselves the unity of mutual love, which is the bond of perfection," – a realistic emphasis in view of the very closeness of their community life.

From these few illustrations it is apparent that the lives of the sisters, like those of the friars, were to revolve around and indeed become totally immersed in the Gospel. While Francis and his friars chose an active apostolate based on genuine fraternity, Clare and her sisters followed the contemplative life. Clare went straight to the kernel and stayed there. The sixth chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel, which recalls Jesus' admonition to do all things in secret for the glory of God, for Him alone to see and reward, describes Clare's life at San Damiano: It was hidden but not isolated. And within the monastery she found ample opportunity to live out the poverty and humility of our Lord Jesus Christ and His holy mother. She chose, like Mary, a life of waiting on the Lord, in a loving care for His interests and a gentle awareness of His presence.

Just how closely she saw her role as linked with that of Mary in the human family of her Son is revealed in these words written to Agnes of Prague: "As the glorious virgin of virgins carried Him in her body, so without shadow of doubt can you carry Him in a spiritual way in your body, if you follow the footsteps of her humility and especially of her poverty. You will contain Him by whom you and all things are contained" (Third Letter).

And how close this is to the thought of Francis in his [First] Letter to All the Faithful: "We are mothers to Him when we enthrone Him in our hearts and souls by love with a pure and sincere conscience, and give Him birth by doing good."

Clare saw this hidden within the context of the Mystical Body of Christ, and was confident of its contribution to that body. Again it is to Agnes of

Prague that she writes: "I hold you to be a co-worker of God Himself and a support for the frail and failing members of His glorious body" (Third Letter).

With this conception of what it meant to be members of Christ's Mystical Body the Church, both Clare and Francis experienced that the three evangelical counsels professed by those who wished to live a life dedicated to God offered limitless opportunities to witness to the poverty of Christ. The true end of poverty is to become less self-centered and more Christcentered, and this we can do by becoming totally dependent on God, by loving each other – and that means giving ourselves to and for each other, and by becoming gradually more submissive to the will of God. This increasing dependence taught both Francis and Clare that sincere gratitude which so animated their life of prayer. A deep appreciation of the Eucharist inspired their approach to community and fraternity, and an understanding of the Incarnation proved the depth of that love to whom they submitted their lives.

A supreme expression of their common spirit was Clare's constant emphasis on and personal witness to the love which should exist between the sisters. She always regarded herself as the handmaid of all the sisters, and she expressed this externally by performing herself the most menial tasks in the house. She firmly believed as Francis did that there must be an external and concrete manifestation of the ideals they professed. Therefore we find her saying in the Testament: "Love one another with the love of Christ, and let the love which you have in your hearts be shown outwardly in your deeds so that, urged on by each other's example, the sisters may always grow in the love of God and in mutual charity."

In all these ways Clare lived out the Beatitudes, which are the mark of an authentic Christian. She became a sign of the love that gives everything in response to Christ's self-giving – the love that goes out to show men how to live as Christians in unity of spirit: true community. She was a woman concerned with essentials and therefore can be a source of inspiration for all of us if we, like her, are prepared to go beyond ourselves and lose ourselves in Christ. Clare gave to God and to his people the only thing she had to offer: her life. Let us, with her, thank God for it.

Notes

1. Rule of St. Clare. Approved by Innocent IV on 9 August 1253.

2. Testament of St. Clare. Transcript from Wadding. Tradition and content argue for its authenticity.

3. Four Letters. From Clare to Agnes of Prague, Poor Clare, written between 1234 and 1253.

4. Blessing of St. Clare. Addressed to Agnes of Prague.

5. Privilege of Poverty. Granted and confirmed by Innocent III in1215. Reconfirmed by Gregory IX in 1228.

- 6. Process of Canonization. Conducted at San Damiano in November 1253, with the interrogation of twenty witnesses.
- 7. Legend of St. Clare. By Thomas of Celano. Commissioned by Alexander IV after the canonization, 1255.

Texts Available (Latin and Spanish):

- 1-7: Escritos de Santa Clara 7 Documentos Contemporaneos, Ignacio Omachevarria, O.F.M., Madrid.
- 1-5 and 7: Legend and Writings of St. Clare of Assisi, ed. Ignatius Brady, O.F.M. Out of print.
- 1-4: Textus Opusculorum S. Francisci et S. Clarae Assisiensium, Johannes Boccali, O.F.M., Assisi, 1976.
- 6: English text in St. Clare of Assisi.