Some Reflections on the Personality of St. Clare sister Christina, O.S.C.

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tender, extremely sensitive, faithful, joyful, open to the Spirit and to

the complement and beauty of personality. When we add the living The traditional sources which treat of St. Clare, such as the Legend of St. Clare and the Process of St. Clare, stress that the saint was "brilliant" (Clara) by name and by nature. Thus she developed a reputation that was described at the end of one of the testimonies of the sisters during the process of canonization: "Consequently the Lady Clare passed from this life to the Lord being truly brilliant and without stain, without the obscurity of sin, to the brilliance of eternal light" (CP III). Clare was a woman who was as transparent as water and bright as a star. This clarity, which was attributed to her from her childhood, is not the same as that of the angels or of beings who do not belong to this earth. Rather it is the clarity of water which is "humble, priceless and chaste," the clarity of the stars which appeared to Francis as "clear . . . priceless and beautiful." It is the beauty found in God's creatures when they recognize themselves and erupt into the action of the Spirit of the Lord "all humble and chaste." This was the only thing which was exceptional about Clare. We are amazed by it as we turn to the sources, for example the Process of St. Clare. It is not that events which might be called extraordinary are wanting in her life, but that even in those circumstances Clare managed to appear so human. A "miracle" occurs only when her womanly and motherly heart cannot resist in the face of a sister racked with pain, deprived of the necessary sustenance, or when confronted by infants - those who were shy or suffering. At such times, in all simplicity she would trust in the power of the sign of the cross, which was perhaps accompanied by an Our Father. The sisters testified that "the medicine which the sisters took when they were ill was that their holy mother made the sign of the cross over them" (CP I). With similar simple abandon, when the Saracens invaded San Damiano, she prostrated herself before the Eucharist and prayed: "Lord, look upon your handmaids, since I cannot look after them" (CP IX).

Once more, in her clearly extraordinary patience, she shows herself to be human and frail, since when she is sick, she gives in to St. Francis, who along with the bishop of Assisi obliged her to eat something daily, and she gives in to her sisters who took off her coarse clothing (CP II). She also shows herself to be so human when she complains to our Lord about being left on her own on Christmas night because she could not accompany the others down to matins (CP III), and when she screams at her kitten because it dragged a little table cloth along the ground (CP IX), and when she rebukes the questing friars for bringing her bread other than that which was

broken in pieces (*CP* III).

Her writings, the Rule, the Testament, and the Letters, show her to be a single-minded woman with purpose, strong and constant, ardent and tender, extremely sensitive, faithful, joyful, open to the Spirit and to the values of her day, filled with the kind of balance and discretion which are the complement and beauty of personality. When we add the living testimony of the sisters to the writings, this testimony given soon after her death makes her image reflect the Gospel even more brightly. It is not precise to refer to her as a female copy of St. Francis. The same charism, the same divine inspiration flourished in her in a unique way with its own novelty. She was not a copy, but rather a feminine model in which he could be found, and in which he could see his image. Still it is true that she depended upon Francis to a certain extent. She was his little plant. As far as she was concerned, he was her "father" and the "one who planted her," the one from whom she felt that she had come.

Every time Clare speaks about St. Francis, her language is filled with unspeakable gratitude which shows the vital link that binds her to him and which proclaims the dependence upon and communion with God who is

the source of life and goodness.

In effect, it is St. Francis who opens the following of Christ to her. She allows herself to be set aflame with the fervor of charity, and she carries on to the end with a heart which is truly open and faithful. The strength and single-mindedness of her character consist in her love of Christ with her whole being, with all the fibers of her heart, as she exhorted Blessed Agnes. Her idealism, her drive, her affections, her human sensitivity, were all tied up with her advance toward Christ and brought this all together splendidly.

I also think that the originality with which she follows the "Son of God who became our way" – a way, as we have seen, that Francis opened for her – is directly connected to the simplicity and truly evangelical prudence which are so personally her own. We know that this originality is to be found in three basic values of the one Franciscan charism: fraternity, poverty, and itinerancy. It has been noted that the totally democratic position which Clare takes in her Rule regarding community life is absolutely revolutionary with respect to its position in monastic life, and also that it is more emphasized there than it is by Francis himself. It is not only that the abbess and mother has the responsibility of service to her sisters and to the way of life, but the whole community is called to a

constant active participation regarding the choice of what is good and useful for the monastery. Her long and intense experience of common life caused her to put in her writings that which is the center of fraternal life: "Holy unity." She did not do this just to protect it from the threats of murmuring, detraction, and division. Holy unity is the fruit of an exchange of charity which is composed of forgiveness, motherly care for one's "spiritual sister," and of availability. It is the divine unity which Francis links with perfect Trinity, which is the real culmination of interpersonal relationships.

With regard to poverty, as we know, Clare obtained the very original "Privilege of Poverty." Not only did she guard the document jealously, but "she honored it with great reverence and guarded it well and with diligence, taking care not to lose it" (*CP III*). But she finally achieved inserting its contents into the sixth chapter of the Rule which she wrote. It has been discovered that St. Clare was the first woman to write a Rule. It appears that it was the imposition of a new Rule, which was given by Innocent IV to "enclosed nuns of the Order of San Damiano," which permitted common ownership of income and possessions, which finally incited her to edit her Rule, which she considered to be the same way of life that St. Francis had given her. Clearly it is a development, which has been enriched by the teaching of the saint and her personal experience during forty years of enclosed life in the community of Santa Maria at San Damiano.

In her own way Clare also lived Franciscan itinerancy. Her space was the contemplative dimension, which was not only sufficient but more than sufficient to walk in the footsteps of Christ. We have evidence in the Process of St. Clare that she never left the confines of San Damiano except by way of exception, to establish new foundations or form other communities. Her itinerancy is that of the heart of Mary, who followed her Son so that she could absorb His word in faith and cherish everything, meditating on it in her heart. Her father Francis had taught her this in the Form of Life, in which he pictured her like Mary, "handmaid of the Father and spouse of the Holy Spirit" (RegCl VI 2), as if she had discovered in the story of the Annunciation the dimension in which she was to live the Gospel. As a confirmation of this, we have the evidence given by a sister (CP X) regarding the event that happened on Good Shepherd Sunday. The fact that the early monasteries were called "St. Mary's" is also significant.

In contrast to Francis, Clare "chose to live enclosed" (see Bull, RegCl 1). She never thought of this in static terms. Rather, her whole language exudes a sense of movement in the following of Christ, with such expressions as: walk, not going backwards, walking with sure steps, running. The Poor Sisters are also "pilgrims and strangers" (RegCl VIII). They are not to step backwards in the face "of any want, poverty, fatigue or tribulation" (TestCl 27), "walking by the narrow road and the thin gate through which one

enters life" (*TestCl* 56). Clare exhorts Blessed Agnes of Prague: "Do not hold yourself back, but with swift progress and light step, with sure foot, which does not allow even dust to slow it down, advances confidently and joyfully along the path of beatitude which you have guaranteed" (*IIILCl*). This beatitude consists in following the Lamb wherever He goes: "I ran without ever becoming tired until you let me into your inebriating cell" (*IVLCl*). Her following of Christ is clearly an espousal.

I indicated before how she involves her whole self in love for "Him who for love of us gave Himself completely" (IIILCI). She gives herself to this Bridegroom "with the whole movement of her heart" (ILC1). "His love will make her chaste, His embraces more pure, possessing Him will confirm her as a virgin. Because His strength is greater than anyone else, His generosity is also greater, His beauty more seductive, His love more sweet" (ILCl). This total love has a theological justification as a response to him who undertook for us all the suffering of the cross, snatching himself from the power of the prince of darkness, who had bound him with chains on account of the sin of the first man, and reconciling him to God the Father (ILCl). It is thus a totality made up of basic Christian motives, caused by "the poor Crucified Man's desires which burn" (ILC1). How frequently Clare uses the verb "to desire!" It is the bursting open of her whole spiritual and human existence to the love of Him. It involves her whole mind, all her emotions, and her whole sensitivity. "His love makes one happy. . . . His suavity pervades the whole soul. His image shines brightly in the memory" (IVLCl).

According to the evidence of the Process, Clare had the gift of tears: "She remained for a long time in prayer with an abundance of tears" (*CP* 6). She was capable of tears and of great rejoicing. There is much evidence on this point. Her letters are full of rejoicing in the Spirit on account of the works which the Lord has done.

Every fiber of her being, every faculty that she possessed, was ready either to welcome God or express Him: "Her speech was always about the things of God, and she did not want to speak about secular things nor wish the sisters to mention them" (CP III). "She strove to please God" (CP VIII).

Clare lived this nuptial communion with God both with regard to accepting Christ and His Father, and with regard to steeping herself in Him to the point of being transformed into His image. These are two aspects of communion which are both very real. The soul becomes bigger than the universe. It can contain its Creator and carry Him in the womb like Mary."Truth Himself states this: He who loves me, will be loved by my Father, and I too shall love him; and we shall come and make our dwelling in Him" (IIILCI). "Gaze upon, meditate on and contemplate your spouse," says Clare.

Here we have a journey of transformation into Christ, a passing into

Him. The first step is "to gaze." In her fourth letter she refers to mirroring oneself in Him. It is a gaze that places the whole of one's being in the image. Gaze. Meditate. "Set your eyes before the mirror of eternity. Set your soul in the splendor of glory. Set your heart on Him who is the image of the divine substance, and transform yourself by means of contemplation into the image of His divinity" (IIILCl). It is noteworthy that Clare makes an indirect reference to 2 Corinthians 3:18, by which she means, even if she does not say so directly, that this transformation is due to the work of the Spirit of the Lord. This, then, is the working of the Spirit of the Lord, which is to be desired above all else (RegCl X).

The same journey is described in the fourth letter in different terms: "Each day set your soul before this mirror," which is the poor crucified Christ. "Gaze ... see ... contemplate ... His voice speaks out from the height of the cross. . . . Let us answer Him who calls and pleads with one voice and a single heart: May the memory of you never leave me, and may my soul melt within me" (IVLCI). To gaze and then to contemplate, to allow oneself to be set alight by charity, which is the Holy Spirit, and to run until He draws one to Himself and brings one into His enthralling dwelling. "Draw me to yourself, O heavenly spouse! I shall run without ever tiring, until you bring me into your enthralling dwelling" (IVLCI). One emerges from contemplation transformed into the image of Him who is the splendor of glory and the poor man on the cross at the one time. "When she returned from prayer, her face appeared to be more beautiful and more brilliant than the sun. Her words exuded unutterable sweetness" (CP IV). Clare must have contemplated many pages of the Gospel. We read them in her writings and hear them from the witnesses, especially passages concerning the infancy and the Passion.

However, beyond these direct references we find the Gospel about the washing of the feet (John 13), which involves her whole attitude toward being the abbess, the mother, the servant who washes the sisters' feet. We find the passage about the useless servant, who has worked with diligence and attention in doing all that was his duty. We find all the Beatitudes, not only joy, but great joy which pervades the soul. These are blessings in the face of poverty, want, fatigue, tribulation, ignominy and contempt on the part of the world (*TestCl* 27). We find Luke 12:22–32, the little flock which depends on the Father who feeds the birds of the air and clothes the lilies of the field. We also find Luke 10:21, the rejoicing of the heart of Jesus before His Father: "May you be blessed, Lord, who have made me" (*CP* III). She spoke so subtly about the Trinity that her sisters did not understand her

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There is a song which goes like this: "Francis is the way, but you, Clare, are the melody of pure Gospel." When we go through the testimonies we see how each sister adds a line to this melody. "This Lady Clare was a

virgin, she was humble, alight with the love of God, sparing with food, frugal with clothing. . . . She had great compassion for those in need. She was kind and generous to everyone . . . and in the government of the monastery and the sisters she was provident and discrete more than one can imagine" (*CP* IX). "She was humble and kind toward the sisters, so patient and persevering in tribulation . . . and so prudent and guarded when correcting the sisters . . . and so gracious and sweet when admonishing them" (*CP* XIV).

She loved poverty so much that neither Pope Gregory nor the bishop of Ostia could ever make her agree to accept possessions. What is more, she sold her inheritance and gave the proceeds to the poor" (*CP* II). "She was all afire with charity and loved her sisters as she loved herself. If on occasion she heard about something which was not pleasing to God, because she was so compassionate she tried to correct the sister without dwelling on the fault" (*CP* XIII). "If on occasion she saw that a sister had suffered some temptation or tribulation, she summoned her in secret and consoled her with tears, and sometimes she threw herself at the sister's feet" (*CP* X). "This mother had so much humility that she washed the sisters' feet.... In addition to this, she washed their hands, covered them at night when it was cold.... She was very merciful and willingly gave the sisters consolation" (*CP* II).

"She was always joyful in the Lord, and you would never see her disturbed.... She made herself less than all others, by serving the sisters" (CP II). "She was just as concerned about observance in her order and the government of the sisters, as a person would be about guarding his earthly treasure. She was assiduous and attentive at prayer ... and when she returned from prayer, the sisters rejoiced as if she had returned from heaven" (CP I). At the end of her life, she composed her canticle and blessed God who had completed His work in her: "Go in peace ... because He who created you also provided for you to be sanctified. Then He who created you infused the Holy Spirit into you, and then watched over you like a mother would her little child (CP XI).

As a seal of this achievement, the Virgin Mary dressed her in her clothing, placed her soft veil upon her. "Once she had been dressed thus, St. Clare... saw how the Virgin of Virgins brushed her face against Clare's, or better, against her breast," and the witness says: "You could not distinguish one from the other" (*CP* XI).

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His Father, "May you be blessed, Lord, who have grade me" (CP III). She