

## Clare, Abbess of Penitents

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"Clara abdis van penitenten"

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The *Testament* of St. Francis opens with the words: "The Lord granted me, Brother Francis, to begin to do penance in this way." He then records the memory of his friendship with the lepers, and the sweetness of soul and body that he experienced there.<sup>1</sup> This is how Francis became a penitent. Several years later, two men from Assisi came to Francis, likewise to live in penance. And when the brothers went around preaching penance and the people asked them who they were, they replied: "We are penitents from the town of Assisi."<sup>2</sup> When Bernard's money was being distributed, Francis gave a handful of money to a certain priest names Sylvester, who was rather greedy, and he asked him: "Do you think you have enough?" Sylvester took the money and went home happily. But a few days later he came to his senses. He reprimanded himself that he, the older person, had behaved so greedily, while the younger Francis had clearly turned away from money and property for the love of God.

That night Sylvester had a dream in which he saw a large cross emanating from Francis's mouth and reaching to the heavens. The crossbars reached from one end of the world to the other. Waking up, Sylvester believed that Francis was indeed a friend of God and that his brotherhood would spread all over the world. The account about Sylvester concludes: "Thus Sylvester was brought to fear God, and he began to do penance while still living in his own house. Before long, however, he entered the fraternity in which he lived perfectly and died gloriously."<sup>3</sup> Brother Giles, the third to follow Francis, said: "If we hadn't had the example of the fathers who went before us, we would not be in a state of penance we are in now."<sup>4</sup> To go and live a life of penance was a contemporary way of life at the time, rooted in the ancient traditions of the fathers of the first and subsequent centuries.

1. *Test* 1-3.

2. Esser, *Origins of the Franciscan Order* p. 19c; *L3S* 27, 37.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 10a-13c; *L3S* 30-31.

4. *Dicta beati Aegidii Assisiensis* (Quaracchi ad Claras Aquas-Florence, 1939), 2d ed., chap. 25, pg. 75: "Si exempla patrum nos precedentium non habuissemus, forsitan in statu poenitentiae, in quo sumus, non essemus."

This life of penance does not mean that Francis and his first brothers joined existing local groups of penitents. Nothing is known about such groups in Assisi at the time. Such groups did indeed exist in other towns. We must make a clear distinction between a personal life of penance and organized fraternities of penitents in other towns, and later on also in Assisi.

We do know enough, however, about the life-style of such penitents to help us detect similar characteristics in the life of Francis after his conversion, and also in the life of Clare in her youth while she was still living at home. Together with the sisters and brothers the Lord had given them, they have this life as a special form, particularly in the following of the words and in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, and by the joy they experienced and manifested to others and indeed to the whole church of that time. (Gerard Peter Freeman has an article about this in *Franciscaans leven* 69 [1989].)

### Clare as Penitent

There are strong indications that Clare lived as a penitent before she met Francis and before she went to the Portiuncula and to San Damiano. This data does not come from *Levensbeschrijving van de heilige maagd Clara* ["The Biography of the Holy Virgin Clare"], which is a secular source, but from the testimonies in the process of her canonization, which was held more than three months after her death. The biography adds nothing new about this.

Of the twenty people who testified about Clare (fifteen sisters from San Damiano and five others), there are eight who knew her during her youth. They are:

1. Sister Pacifica, a neighbor, who spoke with her many times at home. She entered San Damiano in the same year as Clare.

2. Sister Benvenuta, who had lived in Perugia in the same house as Clare. That was in the year 1203-4, when the nobility had been ousted from the town by the commoners. Clare was very young at the time. Benvenuta, who entered the same year as Clare, does not say very much about Clare's youth.

3. Beatrice, Clare's younger sister. She says that "as her own sister, she saw and heard several things from Lady Clare and the others." Beatrice, who entered in 1229, did not know very much about Clare's youth. Agnes, Clare's other sister, who knew her very well at home and who entered shortly after Clare, was still living when Clare died. However, she died shortly before the canonization process. Her mother Hortulana, who also entered San Damiano, had passed away a long time before that. Furthermore, other than the above from the San Damiano convent we have:

4. Lady Bona, Pacifica's sister. She was also a friend of Clare in her younger days. When Clare had her secret meetings with Francis, she accompanied her. But she was on a pilgrimage to Rome when Clare finally fled from her parental home.

5. Lord Hugolino, who lived close to Clare's family home and knew her well.

6. Lord Raineri, who knew Clare when she was still a child, and a regular visitor to the home.

7. Lord Pietro: one of Clare's neighbors, who likewise knew her well.

8. Finally, Joanni di Ventura, who served as a domestic guard in Clare's household and who lived in the house when Clare was young.

Six of the above eight knew Clare really well in the days of her youth. They are: Sister Pacifica, Lady Bona, Lord Hugolino, Lord Raineri, Lord Pietro and Joanni di Ventura. We are well informed by these six witnesses about Clare's youth. They describe her as a girl who devoted herself to prayer and fasting and who excelled in her love for the poor. Her girlfriend Bona says: "She sent food, which, she said, was meant for her to eat, to the poor; and Bona, an eyewitness, declared that she did this for her several times." Clare also gave Bona money and told her to bring it to those who were working at the Portiuncula to buy some meat. Here are probably meant Francis and his helpers, who were busily restoring the chapel of the Portiuncula.<sup>5</sup> Bona testifies "that Lady Clare, when she entered the convent, was a principled young lady of about eighteen years, and that she always remained at home and lived there in seclusion, because she did not want to be seen. She lived in this way, so that she could not be seen by those passing her house."<sup>6</sup>

Lord Pietro testifies "that she remained a virgin and from the beginning devoted herself to works of holiness, as if she had been sanctified from her mother's womb. Because she was pretty, they sought a man for her. And many in her family begged her to agree to take a husband, but she never gave in. And when he, the witness himself, begged her several times to go along with this, she would not even listen to him. Rather she would remind him about the need to despise the world." The notary of the ecclesiastical court continues: "When he was asked how he knew this, he replied: 'Because his wife was a relation of Lady Clare, and because he, the witness, visited Clare's home regularly and saw the above-mentioned good works himself.'"<sup>7</sup>

5. *Clara van Assisi. Geschriften, leven, documenten* (Haarlem, 1984), p. 171, hereafter cited as *Clara*.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*, p. 172.



Lord Pietro testifies: "The aforementioned Lady Clare led, when she was still a young girl, a spiritual life, as was generally believed. And he saw how her father and mother and family wished to give her in marriage to an important and powerful man befitting her noble standing. But in no way could they persuade the girl, who would have been about seventeen years of age at the time, because she wished to remain a virgin and to live in poverty, as she proved later when she sold her share of the inheritance and gave it to the poor. And all admired her for her good conduct. When asked how he knew this, he replied: 'Because I was her neighbor and knew that no one was able to persuade her to turn her senses to earthly things.'"<sup>8</sup>

Joanni di Ventura replied to the question of what kind of life Clare lived: "Although the standard of living in her home was one of the highest in the town and they were very generous in almsgiving, she would still keep the food that was given her to eat, as happens in a large household, set it apart, and have it brought to the poor." He also said "that Clare, when she was still at home with her parents, wore a rough garment under her outer clothing. She also fasted and prayed much, and did other works of charity, as he himself witnessed, and all believed that she was inspired from the beginning by the Holy Spirit. He also said that this Lady Clare resolved in her heart, when she heard that Francis had chosen the way of poverty, to do likewise." He further testified that Francis cut off Clare's hair, and that her family wanted to take her away, but Clare showed them her short-cropped head. "She then went to San Damiano, where she became the mother and mistress of the Order of San Damiano and gave birth there in our Lord Jesus Christ to many sons and daughters, as we can see to this very day."<sup>9</sup>

A clear picture of the youthful Clare, living in her parental home, emerges from the above testimonies. She devoted herself to prayer and fasting and caring for the poor. She lived apart as much as possible, appeared in public on only a few occasions, and avoided as far as possible to be seen by others. This was in no way due to shyness or timidity, because later on she went on her own to meet Francis and left her parental home behind to go to the Portiuncula, accompanied by some of the brothers. Under her normal clothing she wore a rough penitential garment, as did the penitents. This was a garment of undyed wool, of utmost simplicity. She was determined, before she met Francis, not to marry and to dedicate her life totally to God. There is every indication that Clare lived at home as a penitent. But we cannot further deduce that she belonged to an organized and established

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8. *Ibid.*, pp. 173-4.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 174-5.

groups of penitents. Clare lived a life of penance in her parental home. This type of life was well known at the time.

Through her life of penance, Clare did influence others. We think here of her sister Agnes, her friends Bona, Pacifica and Benvenuta, her younger sister Beatrice and her mother Hortulana. With the exception of Bona, all entered San Damiano. We can also mention here her second cousins Amata and Balvina, and others. Because of her way of life and her determination to go the way of poverty and penance from the days of her youth, Clare was for several people an inspiring example and a spiritual guide. And so Bona testifies of her characteristically that "Lady Clare, before her hair was cut short, sent her to the Church of St. James, because she (Lady Clare) was full of grace, and she also desired that the others would be."<sup>10</sup> The Church of St. James probably refers to the sanctuary of the Apostle James: Santiago of Compostella, in the northwest corner of Spain, the most popular place of pilgrimage second to Jerusalem. Clare sent her friend on pilgrimage, before she went to the Portiuncula and San Damiano. This shows the measure of influence Clare had come to bear upon her environment.

#### Clare Meets Francis

When Clare heard that Francis had chosen the way of poverty, she decided to do the same. She had of course heard of Francis before, as he was generally well known and a striking person in the town of Assisi. It is unlikely that she had seen or met him before this. He was twelve years older than Clare, and each belonged to a different class of people. Moreover, Clare led a withdrawn life.

Francis's conversion to the Gospel, and in particular to the following of Christ in poverty and humility, apparently made a great impression on Clare. In him she recognized her own life-style and her desire to follow Christ. We do not know when this took place. Clare was about twelve or thirteen years of age when Francis was converted. It is quite probable that she began to hear more about Francis and his brothers after her cousin Rufino joined Francis's companions. Rufino was the seventh to follow Francis. Clare was then about fifteen or sixteen. Joanni di Ventura says of Clare that "when she heard that the holy Francis had chosen the way of poverty, she resolved in her heart to do the same."<sup>11</sup>

Sister Pacifica testifies: "When the holy Francis heard about her call to holiness, he went several times to converse with her, and as a consequence the virgin Clare was in agreement with his preaching and

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 171-72.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

renounced the world and all earthly things and went to serve God as quickly as she could."<sup>12</sup>

From whom came the initiative? Clare heard about Francis and wished to follow his way of poverty. Francis heard about Clare and wished to converse with her. They recognized in each other the way of imitation of Jesus Christ. Clare's flight from her parents' home to the Portiuncula took place after these conversations. It was on Palm Sunday night, March 18, 1212. Clare knew that she would not get permission to follow Francis in poverty. For this reason she fled at night, not through the main entrance but through a small exit where she had to remove by herself the stones and timber that blocked entry from outside. Once outside, she found "fitting company," probably several of Francis's companions or perhaps Francis himself.<sup>13</sup>

How did she get outside the town? The town's gates were closed at night. It is possible that they found a way via the Moiano Gate, which was being repaired at the time. This way out leads directly to the Portiuncula. A second possibility is that they went via the bishop's residence, which lay next to the town's walls. But that would mean that the bishop was very much involved in this flight. A third possibility is that Clare ran away from the summer residence that no doubt the family owned. We shall probably never know how with any certainty.<sup>14</sup>

At the Portiuncula, the other brothers were waiting for Clare. Under her outer clothing she wore the penitential garb. She needed only to divest herself of her beautiful garments and put on the habit over this penitential garb, like the brothers wore theirs. Francis cut off her long hair and she received a veil. She promised obedience to Francis. Through this profession, her new life took on a clear ecclesial dimen-

12. Ibid., p. 161-62.

13. Ibid., p. 194. *Levensbeschrijving van de heilige maagd Clara*, no. 7: In trusted company (*honestas societas*) Clare made her escape which she had wanted. She opened the gate "with a force that surprised her." The trusted company waited outside. It seems unlikely that her friend Pacifica accompanied her that night on the way to the Portiuncula. There is no evidence for this in her *Life* and in the testimony given by Pacifica. Most probably some of the brothers accompanied her. The gate chosen by Clare was less noticeable and risky.

14. I received this information from Hel  ne Nolthenius. She writes: "Bills of sale show that the commune had acquired houses and *casalina*—buildings with a courtyard—just outside the gate, and commenced work: to unblock the springs of the Fonte di Moaino, and to construct a simple structure for the spring. This work lasted well into the month of March, and it seems quite possible that the search for the spring could have caused some undermining or temporary openings in the wall or gate. But this is only a suggestion! I can't understand how else Clare was able to leave the town. Another possibility is via the Vescavado, which stood next to the town's wall—if it is true that the bishop was aware of the plan. However, so much active assistance in a spectacular 'kidnap' is difficult to accept. I have also asked myself if perhaps Clare walked away from the summer residence, which the family no doubt possessed" (from a letter dated December 24, 1985).



sion and meaning. In 1210, Francis had promised obedience to the pope, and his companions had promised obedience to Francis. Clare now did the same as the brothers had done, because she also desired to live her new life in the bosom of the church. She now belonged to the order of Francis and his brothers, as approved by the pope. Clare called this profession her "conversion" (*conversio*). This marks the beginning of her life according to the perfection of the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Everything that happened the night of March 18, 1212, had been well prepared, perhaps even with the connivance of the bishop of Assisi. It was also part of this prepared plan that Clare would go as quickly as possible to the convent of the Benedictine nuns at Bastia. This lay relatively close by. She would not have to go past Assisi to get there. The Benedictine nuns put her up for several days.<sup>15</sup> It was only a temporary stay. Several days later Clare went, accompanied by Francis and Philip to the convent of San Angelo di Pazo, which lay on the other side of Assisi just below the Carceri. This was probably not a convent of the Benedictines but of the "poor ladies living in seclusion" (*pauperes dominae reclusae*), who followed the way of poverty and penance.<sup>16</sup> This is where Agnes joined her sister. Together they went to San Damiano some time later. It seems likely that this had been the intention of Clare and Francis all along – that she and the women would join her, would go to San Damiano. But first the church, dormitory and probably several other spaces, had to be made ready by Francis and his brothers for the reception of Clare and her sisters. It was obvious that other women would follow Clare. Recent diggings have revealed which works Francis and his companions had done at San Damiano.<sup>17</sup>

15. In 1201 Pope Innocent III gave permission to the abbess of the Benedictine convent in Bastia to admit persons who flee the world willingly for the sake of conversion. The text of the Bull says: "The abbess has been given permission *personas liberas et absolutas a saeculo fugientes ad conversionem recipere et eas absque contradictione aliqua retinere.*" This information also comes from Helène Nolthenius.

16. See *Clara*, p. 19.

17. Marino Bigaroni, O.F.M., "La Chiesa di San Damiano prima di San Francesco," in *Porziuncola*, 62, no. 6 (Assisi, June 1986): 187–89. According to Bigaroni, recent diggings show that San Damiano originally had a crypt. The church was built according to the popular design of a Roman monastery church/chapel: an elevated choir-crypt-nave. Francis altered this threefold structure to make the church more suitable for Clare and her sisters. He made the floor of the church level. Moreover, he constructed, a dormitory according to canonical requirements; it can still be seen today. Thus the entire building was made ready for Clare and her sisters. Helène Nolthenius thinks that Francis used the stones of the demolished crypt for the additions to the convent. Bigaroni's article was published in "San Damiano-Assisi: The First Church of St. Francis," *Franciscan Studies* 47 (1987): 45–97.

The Penitents of San Damiano, Living according to the Perfection of the Gospel

In her *Testament* Clare says: "After the most high heavenly Father saw fit in His mercy and grace to enlighten my heart to do penance according to the example and teaching of our most blessed father Francis, shortly after his own conversion, I, together with the few sisters whom the Lord had given me soon after my conversion, voluntarily promised him obedience, since the Lord had given us the light of His grace through his holy life and teaching."<sup>18</sup> Like Francis, she characterizes her life at San Damiano as a life of penance. We hear the same from Sister Filippa in the *Acts of the Process of Canonization of St. Clare* that "she entered the same convent four years after Clare began her convent life, inspired by the preaching of Francis, because the holy Clare reminded her how our Lord Jesus Christ underwent His suffering and died on the cross for the salvation of the human race. She decided therefore to embrace her convent life in a spirit of reparation, and to do penance with her."<sup>19</sup>

We hear the same in the sixth chapter of Clare's *Rule*, where she says:

After the most high celestial Father saw fit to enlighten my heart by His grace to do penance according to the example and teaching of our most blessed father St. Francis, shortly after his own conversion, I, together with my sisters, voluntarily promised him obedience. When the blessed father saw that we had no fear of poverty, hard work, suffering, shame, or the contempt of the world, but that instead we regarded such things as great delights, moved by compassion he wrote for us a form of life as follows: "Since by divine inspiration you have made yourselves daughters and servants of the most high king, the heavenly Father, and have taken the Holy Spirit as your spouse, choosing to live according to the perfection of the holy Gospel..."<sup>20</sup>

To this Francis adds the promise to take constant care of Clare and her sisters, just like of his own brothers.

In these words Clare typifies her life as a life of penance. This penance consists of poverty, work and mortification. The extraordinary aspect of this life of penance is not only that the sisters are not afraid (fearful), but also that they consider their life to be attractive. The words in Latin are *pro magnis deliciis habere*. This means literally that they considered their life "to have great pleasures or delights." Clare's words, which describe how much Francis appreciated the life of penance at San Damiano, not so much because of its severity but more because of its joyfulness, are similar to the words Francis himself uses

18. *Clara*, p. 62. *TestCl* 24-25.

19. *Clara*, pp. 131-32.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45; *RCl* VI 1-3.



at the beginning of his life of penance when he talks about the most bitter thing being changed into sweetness of soul and body. And so Francis could write in his short *Rule* for Clare and her sisters that they were the bride of Christ, because they had chosen a life according to the perfection of the holy Gospel. This perfection refers to both the following of the words and the footsteps of Jesus, as well as the joy experienced. Both the following and the joy are clearly manifest in the writings of Clare: her *Rule*, her *Testament*, and the letters she wrote to Agnes of Prague.

### Conclusion

Both Clare and Francis, divinely inspired, chose a life of penance. This movement existed already before their time. Nowhere does it appear that they joined an already-existing group of penitents common in other towns. Clare was already a penitent in her youth. While at home with her parents, she lived in seclusion, in prayer, in fasting and in the service of the poor. Afterwards she joined the penance-community of Francis and his companions. Francis knew about Clare and Clare about Francis. They were mutually drawn to each other, because they recognized in each other the same life of penance. By following the poor and humble Christ and by the joy they experienced therein and shared with others, they both gave this life a richer and deeper content. For many, Francis became another Christ and the symbol of a new person. According to the striking testimony of Joanni di Ventura, Clare not only became the mother and mistress of the Order of San Damiano, but also she gave birth to many sons and daughters there, adding: "as can be seen up to this day."<sup>21</sup> That is still the case. It is miraculous that the township of Assisi has brought forth two such persons!

In his Bull of canonization, Pope Alexander IV calls Clare "the precursor of the poor, the guide of the humble, the mistress of all those who live in celibacy, and the abbess of penitents."<sup>22</sup>

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21. *Clara*, p. 175.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 181. The text says: "Haec fuit pauperum primiceria, ducissa humilium, magistra continentium et poenitentium abbatissa."