Clare of Assisi's Mysticism of the Poor Crucified

Ingrid Peterson, O.S.F.

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The church celebrated the 800th anniversary of the birth of Saint Clare of Assisi from her feast on August 11, 1993, through the feast of Saint Francis, October 4, 1994. For nearly eight hundred years she has been hidden under the shadow of Francis. The celebration of eight centuries of her life has sparked exceptional enthusiasm for Clare, affectionately described by a newspaper headline in the English-speaking world as "Clare mania."

Contemporary Poor Clares around the world have spearheaded some of the recent interest and scholarship. The Sisters of the Monastery of Nantes, France, have presented an invaluable tool for reading Clare in publishing a synthesis of the writings and principal sources for the study of Clare, translated into English and produced as a four volume work, *Towards the Discovery of Clare of Assisi*. This work was a response to the call of the Second Vatican Council for religious groups to know the spirit of their founders through a systematic study of fundamental texts.

The publication of primary sources by Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M.Cap., Clare of Assisi: Early Documents, brought new scholarship on Clare for English-speaking audiences. Recent book-length works produced on Clare in the English-speaking world include a translation of Marco Bartoli's Clare of Assisi; Margaret Carney, O.S.F., The First Franciscan Woman: Clare of Assisi and her Form of Life; a revision by Murray Bodo, O.F.M., Clare, a Light in the Garden; Clare: Her Light and her Song by Karen Karper, O.S.C.; Clare of Assisi: Investigations, Mary Francis Hone, O.S.C., general editor; In the Footsteps of Saint Clare: A Pilgrims' Guide Book by Ramona Miller, O.S.F.; Clare of Assisi: a Biographical Study by Ingrid Peterson, O.S.F.; Guidelines for the Study of Clare

by Helen Budzik, OSF; and Roberta McKelvie, O.S.F.: and *Praying With Clare*, fifteen meditations by Ramona Miller, O.S.F. and Ingrid Peterson, O.S.F. Yet no treatment of Clare's contribution to mysticism has been attempted.

Saint Clare of Assisi lived from 1193-1253 during the period when feminine mysticism flourished. Her spirituality was influenced by the affective spirituality of Bernard of Clairvaux and by devotion to the humanity of Christ. Clare's experience of God was characterized by the evangelical spirituality that marks the Franciscan movement. She performed many miracles, healing her sisters within the monastery and those who came to her for physical cures. The testimony of those who lived with her verify that Clare drew from the power of the cross, for she always made the sign of the cross over the infirmity of those who came to her for miraculous cures. She is the first woman to write and have a rule approved by the church. Clare died in 1253 and was canonized in 1255.

The Life and Sources for the Study of Clare

Clare of Assisi was born in the last decade of the twelfth century, twelve years after Francis. The details of Clare's early life are minimal. Even her birth date as 1193 is conjecture. Her father, Favarone, was a count. When Clare was a small child, because of the street fighting in Assisi, the women and children of the noble class were forced into exile in nearby Perugia. The merchant class, to which Francis belonged, was gaining power by force as the feudal system broke down and the new nations of Europe began to emerge. During the first decade of the thirteenth century, a commune provided enough stability for the young Clare to return to Assisi with her mother and two sisters.

Clare made private vows of chastity and poverty before consecrating herself to the gospel life. Lord Ranieri testified that he and many other great and wealthy wished to marry Clare, but she refused because she had made a private vow of virginity. Moreover, she preached to them that they should not be so concerned about the things of this world. She also decided to divest herself of her entire inheritance in order to give the money to the poor. Her sister Beatrice said that Clare sold part of her inheritance, too, and gave it to the poor.

Meanwhile, Francis of Assisi had reached his twenties and had publicly rejected the new way of wealth of his merchant father in order to begin a life of penance. Clare's sister Beatrice testified that Francis came to visit Clare because he heard about her holiness. Little is known of what happened next, except that, accompanied by companions, Clare and Francis met frequently. Because Clare was living a holy life with a community of lay women, much like

the women of the Beguine movement, Francis had to convince Clare to begin a new way of life.

Perhaps Clare had heard Francis preach in the Cathedral of San Rufino, and needed little persuasion to set out to follow more closely in the footsteps of Jesus in the gospel. Some conniving between Clare and Francis must have taken place, perhaps even involving the canons of the cathedral and Bishop Guido, for in 1212 on Palm Sunday morning, when the other noble women of Assisi put on their finery and paraded through the streets of Assisi and up to the altar to receive a blessed palm, Clare remained behind. Bishop Guido came to her and placed the blessed palm in her hand. It was as if the bishop, in behalf of the church, gave Clare a sign of his approval of her plan to leave her father's house.

That evening, Clare made a dramatic exit, as if miraculously opening the heavy door of her family home, making her way down the winding streets of Assisi, outside the city walls, through the dark olive groves, and to the small chapel of the Portiuncula where Francis and his brothers waited for her. After she received the tonsure and the drab garb of the Poor Brothers, Francis's brothers lit the way with torches until Clare reached the Monastery of San Paolo in Bastia, where she found sanctuary at the consecrated altar of the Benedictines.

A woman of Clare's stature and beauty could not defy the customs of her family and her culture without a dramatic reaction. Clare came from a family of seven great and powerful knights; her father and some of the other knights may have been away on a crusade, for Pacifica, who lived across the piazza from the Offreduccio household and who accompanied Ortulana on her pilgrim journeys, testified that she had never seen Clare's father Favarone.

Clare's Uncle Monaldo came with force to reclaim her, but he withdrew because the Benedictine property was reserved as a sanctuary of non-violence. After spending Holy Week in the Benedictine house of San Paolo in Bastia she moved to Sant' Angelo of Panzo at the foot of Mount Subasio, where her sister Agnes joined her. Again Clare's relatives came and this time attempted to drag away Agnes with force, but their efforts were miraculously stopped through Clare's prayers. Although her 'heart was restless' there, Clare and her sister waited until the little church of San Damiano was sufficiently repaired so together they could dedicate their lives as poor virgins in imitation of the poor Jesus.

Clare, her sister Agnes, and several noble women from Assisi and Perugia began to live a simple life of poverty at San Damiano outside the city walls of Assisi. Immediately other noble women from Assisi and neighboring towns came to live and pray with them. Eventually, Clare's younger sister Beatrice and her mother Ortulana came to live in the community of San Damiano. Pacifica Guelfuccio, who lived on the piazza of San Rufino, and Philippa di Ghislerio and Benvenuta of Perugia knew Clare and prayed with her in the Offreduccio household. Lady Cristiana, who had been in Clare's home the night of her flight to the Portiuncula, also came to live at San Damiano within a short time. Beatrice said that her older sister's holiness consisted

in her virginity, humility, patience, and kindness; in the necessary correction and sweet admonition of her sisters; in the continuous application to her prayer and contemplation, abstinence and fasting; in the roughness of her bed and clothing; in the disregard of herself, the fervor of her love of God, her desire for martyrdom, and, most especially, in her love of the Privilege of Poverty. (*Proc XII.6*)

Soon many others came to live at San Damiano, so that within twenty-five years, the small monastery housed fifty Poor Ladies. Although Clare remained in the enclosure of San Damiano, her reputation for holiness spread throughout the Umbrian Valley and beyond. Other houses of women who wanted to follow the gospel in imitation of Saint Clare began to spring up throughout Europe.

The Poor Ladies of San Damiano lived as penitents. In her *Testament*, Clare recalls how she and a few other sisters promised obedience to Francis for he saw that, although they were weak and frail, they "did not shirk deprivation, poverty, hard work, trial, or the shame or contempt of the world" (*TestCl* 27). Because Francis saw that the Poor Ladies were living like his brothers, he promised always to "have the same loving care and special solicitude for us as for his own brothers" (*TestCl* 29). The essence of life for both Francis and Clare was to live the Gospel in a way it had not been lived. Everything they did was in imitation of Jesus' life on earth.

Clare considered all persons to be equal in the sight of God. Most religious houses in Clare's time were filled with noble women who brought with them a large dowry which helped to sustain the properties of the monastery. Abbesses, some commanding great power and authority, such as at Fontevrault, ruled over monasteries of men and women in the twelfth and thirteenth century. Some noble women lived luxurious lives and brought their servants with them to the monastery. Although many who lived with Clare were from the nobility, they did not maintain personal wealth for their comfort. Their lives were austere, eating the food the brothers were able to beg for them, wearing simple clothing, living from the work of their hands. Because it was essential to imitation of the poor Christ, Clare's *Rule* included a chapter on the manner of work:

Let the sisters to whom the Lord has given the grace of working work faithfully and devotedly after the Hour of Terce at work that pertains to a virtuous life and

the common good. They must do this is 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 (RCI 7:1).

Clare called the Poor Ladies her sisters, rather than nuns, for she saw them all sharing a common humanity with Jesus. Although she finally agreed to accept the role of abbess, Clare never used the term, living among her sisters as one who served. Those who lived with her said she never asked them to do anything she would not do herself, that she chose the most demanding tasks for herself, and that when a sister had a worn cloak, she would take it for herself. Clare began to serve as the abbess of San Damiano when she was twenty-one and served her sisters until she died at nearly sixty.

Clare had a reputation for holiness as a lay woman of Assisi. She was known for her good works, her virtue, and her spirit of prayer. After she began to live at San Damiano, her reputation spread throughout the Umbrian valley and beyond. Many persons who were in need of healing came to visit Clare. Parents brought their children—some traveling long distances—and even the sisters who lived with Clare asked her to cure their illnesses. No matter if the person was from inside or outside the monastery, Clare made the sign of the cross over the person who asked to be healed, indicating that the healing occurred through the power from the cross.

Although there is little evidence that Clare left her monastery, her prayers and those of the Poor Ladies served the entire community. One day the city of Assisi, which was threatened by the armies of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, was saved through the prayers of Clare and the Poor Ladies. To this day a city-wide celebration on June 23, called the *Festa del Voto*, celebrates how Clare saved Assisi from the attack of the Saracens. At another time, the monastery itself was invaded by the Saracens, but delivered through the prayers of Clare and the Poor Ladies. Clare turned to the power of the Eucharist for supernatural strength in order to accomplish these miracles.

In 1224, the year that Saint Francis received the stigmata, Clare became seriously ill, and was forced to spend much of the remainder of her life bedridden. In her youth, Clare had been severe in her practice of bodily penance. She practiced many of the popular penitential practices of her time, wearing a hair shirt, giving alms, and fasting. The sisters became alarmed that Clare's health would be endangered because of her fasts, until Francis and the Bishop of Assisi convinced her to eat food regularly. Nonetheless, her body must have already been broken down from inadequate nutrition.

Clare and the Poor Ladies suffered poor health and death, common in the thirteenth century. The exact nature of Clare's illness is not known, but she

continued to function as abbess of the monastery. The sisters tell how even in her illness she would work at cloth making, and provided corporals and altar linens to more than fifty churches in the area surrounding Assisi. Clare was insistent that the sisters at the Monastery of San Damiano could sustain themselves through the work of their hands and through alms.

Francis's Form of Life

Francis received oral approval in 1209 for his Form of Life, which was in general a compilation of Gospel texts about poverty. In 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council decreed that no more religious rules would be established. Probably because Clare had accepted Francis's Form of Life, in 1216 Clare requested and received the Privilege of Poverty from Pope Innocent III, the right to live without communal property.

In 1218, Cardinal Protector Hugolino issued a new rule for the Monastery of San Damiano which did not include Clare's Privilege of Poverty, nor did it legislate ministry to the Poor Ladies by Francis and his brothers. In her *Testament*, Clare wrote that Francis's death in 1226 was a loss she felt she would be unable to bear. After his death, a papal bull, *Quo Elongati*, was promulgated which prohibited the brothers serving as preachers to the Poor Ladies.

Clare protested that if the sisters were to be deprived of the brothers' preaching, they would also refuse to accept the food the brothers obtained for them. Clare's "hunger strike" brought results, as Cardinal Hugolino rescinded this aspect of his Rule. In 1247, Pope Innocent IV made another effort to write a Rule for the Poor Ladies, but that Rule did not include Clare's Privilege of Poverty. Soon after this, Clare began to write her own Form of Life, which was closer to the spirit of Francis, and which was approved on her death bed in 1253. Clare had persevered and triumphed.

Some of the most reliable sources about Clare are the eyewitness accounts of those who knew her as a child and lived with her in the Monastery of San Damiano. Two months after her death, in November 1253, an investigation was held to obtain evidence about Clare's holiness and manner of living. Fifteen of the Poor Ladies testified about Clare's life, providing an important primary source called the *Process of Canonization*. Their testimony and that of five other witnesses was utilized in compiling the *Legend of Saint Clare*, a document produced at the time of the canonization which was often used for liturgical readings for the saint's feast day.

The Four Letters to Agnes of Prague

As Francis's stark imitation of the poverty of Christ attracted many followers, so Clare's monastery at San Damiano grew rapidly, and other foundations throughout Northern Italy began to spring up with the poverty of the gospel as their form of life. Agnes of Prague was one of Clare's followers. Daughter of Ottokar I, King of Bohemia, and Constance of Hungary, she was born in Prague in the year 1200. Although betrothed as a child several times in alliances that were broken, the princess Agnes continued to be sought as a bride. In an aristocratic system in which property married property and kingdoms married kingdoms, Agnes turned down a number of marriage proposals, including one by Frederick II, Emperor of Germany.

By 1225, the Friars Minor arrived in Prague and began to live in a monastery built by Agnes of Prague; no doubt, it was through them that Agnes learned of Clare and the life of the Poor Ladies of San Damiano. By 1232, Agnes had sold her inheritance in order to provide for the needy, and built a hospice for lepers and a monastery for the Poor Ladies in Prague. Agnes entered this monastery with seven other noble women of Prague and five Poor

Ladies from Italy.

In 1234, on the occasion of Agnes's entrance and that of seven other noble women of Prague, Clare wrote a congratulatory letter to her urging her to persevere in the way of poverty. On several occasions, Agnes consulted Clare about matters pertaining to the regulation of their life. Clare's responses, called the Letters to Agnes, reveal Clare's convictions about poverty and contemplation. These four letters are the primary texts for the study of Clare's spirituality and mystical thought.

While Agnes of Prague began her life following Clare's norm for poverty, in 1235 Cardinal Hugolino, now Gregory IX, informed Agnes that he had joined the administrations of the hospice and the monastery in order to guarantee the economic support of the Poor Ladies of Prague. Responding to this in a Second Letter, Clare urged Agnes to persevere in her commitment to imitate the Poor Jesus, no matter the advice given to her. She wrote a Third Letter of encouragement to Agnes in 1235 when Agnes decided to leave her hospice work, choosing to remain enclosed. A Fourth Letter, from 1253, the

¹Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M.Cap., ed. and trans., *Clare of Assisi*; *Early Documents*, Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1988: 39. All references to Clare's writings are to this edition.

year of Clare's death, describes contemplation before the crucifix as the way of transformation.

In her letters, Clare commended Agnes on her exchange of material things for spiritual benefits. For Clare, poverty meant emptying the soul to make room for the mystery of God. By gazing upon the image of the Crucified, Clare came to know his poverty which became the foundation for her own interior *kenosis* and practice of poverty. Because Jesus was born poor and naked in the crib and died poor and naked on the cross, the only way Clare knew to imitate him was also to be poor. Clare understood that being poor was a spiritual condition related to union with Christ and that before God she was indeed poor.

Theological Foundations of Clare's Mysticism

While modern theology tends to be based on the teaching of Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure and Duns Scotus articulate the Franciscan understanding of God. In order to grasp the uniqueness of Clare's contribution to mysticism, the theological foundations underlying Clare's mysticism may be approached from four perspectives: God, Christ, the world, and the church.² Francis and Clare experienced God as transcendent good. Clare wrote to Agnes in 1238: "I give thanks to the Giver of grace from whom, we believe, every good and perfect gift proceeds" (2LAg 3). Everything that is given on earth is given from the generosity of God's goodness, given and renewed each day.

At the beginning of her *Testament*, the most autobiographical of Clare's writings, she declares:

Among the other gifts that we have received and do daily receive from our benefactor, the Father of mercies, and for which we must express the deepest thanks to the glorious Father of Christ, there is our vocation, for which, all the more by way of its being more perfect and greater, do we owe the greatest thanks to Him. (TestCl 2-3)

For Clare, God's generosity deserves gratitude.

Clare experienced God as transcendent power, generosity, beauty, tenderness and courtesy in her consecration to Jesus Christ:

²Joseph P. Chinnici, O.F.M., from the *Proceedings of English-speaking Friars' Conference*, "Evangelical and Apostolic Tensions," in: *Our Franciscan Charism in the World Today*, St. Bonaventure University, 1987. This approach to the theological foundations of Clare's spirituality follows the outline and argument used in Chinnici's discussion of the Franciscan tradition.

Whose power is stronger,
Whose generosity more abundant,
Whose appearance more beautiful,
Whose love more tender,
Whose courtesy more gracious (1LAg 9).

These gifts, given by Christ to those who choose God with their "whole heart and soul," are greater than the soul is capable of receiving. God is always more than we can absorb. In other words, God's generosity is beyond human comprehension; the Christ who enters human history is the greatest gift of all.

The transcendent vision of God in the heavenly Jerusalem, glorious, brilliant and without blemish, can be experienced in mystical prayer. Clare describes for Agnes of Prague her experiential knowledge of God as kindness and delight. Happy, indeed, is she

to whom is given to share in this sacred banquet so that she might cling with all her heart to Him Whose beauty all the blessed hosts of heaven unceasingly admire Whose affection excites Whose contemplation refreshes, Whose kindness fulfills, Whose kindness fulfills, Whose delight replenishes, Whose remembrance delightfully shines, By Whose fragrance the dead are revived, Whose glorious vision will bless all the citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem: which, since it is the splendor of eternal glory, is the brilliance of eternal light and the mirror without blemish (4LAg 9-14).

God gave Clare divine inspiration, the Son as Savior, sisters as consolation, brothers as ministers of the Word, the joy of the spirit, and the promise of eternal life. Clare experienced God as affection, sweetness, beauty, power and unknowability who daily gave to Clare, a "useless servant," a vocation that called her to return love for love, and to exhort her sisters in *The Testament*, to "consider the immense gifts that God has bestowed on us" (*TestCl* 6).

Clare approached nature from the analogical perspective characteristic of medieval thought. Nature and Scripture are books which reveal the goodness of God. Clare saw God as Goodness, giving itself to a world that is also good and bearing the marks of its creator. Because the vision of the creator is in the works of creation, when Clare "used to send the serving sisters outside the monastery, she reminded them 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* XVI:9).

God, as Clare wrote to Agnes, is transcendent in the act of creation as well as in the human heart, making all things from nothing. "You have taken hold

of that incomparable treasure hidden in the field of the world and of the human heart (cf. Mt 13:44) with which you have purchased that by whom all things have been made from nothing" (3LAg 7). Despite the splendor and magnitude of all created works, Clare viewed them as insignificant before God as Creator, who "the heavens and the rest of creation cannot contain" (3LAg 22). The goodness of God is beyond human comprehension.

In the Third Letter to Agnes, Clare interprets the divine indwelling, explaining that the soul is the throne of God in the same way that Mary's womb was the throne for Jesus. Every human is a Christ bearer:

As the glorious Virgin of virgins carried [Him] materially, so you, too, by following in her footprints (cf. 1 Pet 2:21), especially [those] of poverty and humility, can, without any doubt, always carry Him spiritually in your chaste and virginal body, holding Him by Whom you and all things are held together (Wis 1:7), possessing that which, in comparison with the other transitory possessions of this world, you will possess more securely (3LAg 24-26).

What is significant in the passage is the position in which Clare perceived Christ in relationship to creation; she attested to the primacy of Christ in creation. It is in Christ that "all things are held together." In the theology of John Duns Scotus and Bonaventure, Christ is the Firstborn of creation, through whom, in whom, and for whom the world was made. God the Son is the reason and the fulfillment of God's act of creation. God created the Son and the world through goodness. In the spirituality of Francis and Clare, it is essential to contemplate Christ in order to move from God to the world.

The Poor Crucified

Joseph P. Chinnici, O.F.M., illustrates how the mystery of the Incarnation is inseparable from creation itself:

Given the reality of the world being created through Christ, it is clear that the Incarnation, in view of which the world was created, as Scotus would put it later, comes as a light to reveal the world to itself, that is, as existing from and for God, as stamped with God's beauty and goodness. The Incarnation completes the world, brings it to fulfillment. Christ recapitulates all that is, a teaching in the Church going back to St. Paul and finding its earliest expression in Irenaeus of Lyons. Christ comes to reveal to the world its own giftedness; by his life and death he illuminates its deepest reality.

³Bonaventure also held that the fall of Adam brought the Incarnation.

⁴Chinnici 107. This argument about Clare is developed from evidence about Francis in the section, "How Does Francis Experience God?"

The giftedness which Christ comes to reveal, the fact that all comes from the goodness of God and is to go back to that goodness, because of sin, is revealed through the reality of Jesus, "who made himself poor for our sakes (cf. Cor 8:9)."

Poverty, then, for Clare is the primary means of identifying with Christ and the only way to enter into the kingdom of heaven. In Chapter Six, at the heart of her *Rule*, Clare includes Francis's admonition to the Poor Ladies about poverty:

Shortly before his death he once more wrote his last will for us that we—or those, as well, who would come after us—would never turn aside from the holy poverty we had embraced. He said:

I, little brother Francis, wish to follow the life and poverty of our most high Lord Jesus Christ and of His holy mother and to persevere in this until the end; and I ask and counsel you, my ladies, to live always in this most holy life and poverty. And to keep most careful watch that you never depart from this by reason of the teaching or advice of anyone (RCl 6:7).

Jesus was born into the world poor and naked, receiving his human flesh from the Virgin Mary, and died poor and naked on the cross. Jesus redeemed the world by his poverty, the poverty of becoming human and totally dependent on God. Chinnici emphasizes:

...the world is not poor; it is rich in God's goodness, image and likeness. Jesus restores it, recreates it, by becoming poor and relying on God's abundance in the world to feed and clothe him. Jesus redeems, performs salvific activity, not by giving but by receiving, thus revealing to the world and to the people at the same time as he is redeeming it, the goodness of God.⁷

The primary identity of Clare and the Poor Ladies was the Privilege of Poverty, identifying her with the lowest strata of society, that is, those who were dependent and without legal status. Clare's directive to Agnes, written after she had lived at San Damiano for over a decade, illustrates her emphasis on poverty in imitation of Jesus, "As someone zealous for the holiest poverty, in a spirit of great humility and most ardent charity, you have held fast to the

⁵Chinnici, 109.

⁶Armstrong, 69.

⁷Chinnici, 110.

⁸Ingrid J. Peterson, O.S.F., "The Poor Jesus," *Clare of Assisi; a Biographical Study*, Quincy, Il: Franciscan Press, 1993, 177. It was also for this reason that Francis called his fraternity the "brothers minor."

footprints of Him to Whom you have merited to be joined as Spouse" (2LAg 7).

Images of the poor Christ dominate Clare's letters to Agnes, especially the first letter whose theme is poverty:

Be strengthened in the holy service you have undertaken out of a burning desire for the Poor Crucified, Who for the sake of all of us took upon Himself the Passion of the Cross (Heb 12:2), delivered us from the Prince of Darkness (Col 1:3), to whom we were enslaved because of the disobedience of our first parent, and so reconciled us to God the Father (2 Cor 5:18) (1LAg 13-14).

Clare links redemption and poverty because salvation was accomplished through Jesus' poverty:

The foxes have dens, He says, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head (Mt 8:20), but bowing His head gave up His Spirit.

If so great and good a Lord, then, on coming into the Virgin's (cf. Cor 8:5) womb, chose to appear despised, needy, and poor in this world, so that the people who were in utter poverty, want, and absolute need of heavenly nourishment might become rich in Him by possessing the kingdom of heaven, be very joyful and glad (cf. Hab 3:18) (*ILAg* 18-20)!

The Deception of the World

The unique insight of Clare is that the world bears both the effects of redemption and of human sinfulness. Clare harmonizes a view of the world as an immersion in the divine and as a place of temptation. Clare used the term world (saeculum) many times as a place of deception, such as the "snares of the world, the flesh and the devil." The world is temporal and its vanities are ephemeral, but their deceit must be combatted before holiness is attainable: "After all who ensnare their blind lovers in a deceitful and turbulent world have been completely sent away, you may totally love Him who gave himself totally for your love" (3LAg 15).

Clare demonstrated enormous understanding of the obstacles and temptations to the spiritual life, understanding the spiritual life as a progressive movement from virtue to virtue. The world and its deceptions must be forsaken. In her *Rule*, Clare writes, "I admonish and exhort the sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ to beware of all pride, vainglory, envy, avarice, care and

⁹Francis also held this position.

anxiety about this world, detraction and murmuring, dissention and division" (RCl 10).

The section of the Legend on the daily instruction of the sisters, describes how Clare taught others to combat temptations against the spiritual life:

She encouraged them to consider the demands of the flesh as insignificant and to restrain the frivolities of the flesh with the reigns of reason. She showed them how the insidious enemy lays traps for pure souls, in one way tempting the holy, in another, the worldly. Finally, she wanted them to so work with their hands during certain hours that, according to the desire of the Founder, they would keep warm through the exercise of prayer and, fleeing the lukewarmness of neglect, would put aside the coldness of a lack of devotion by the fire of holy love (Leg 36).

Lord Hugolino described Clare's virtue by "her patience and constancy in trial" (*Proc* XVI:4). The difficulties of her departure from home, her poor health, and her struggle to preserve her ideal of poverty were experiences that developed compassion in Clare. Sister Agnes, the mayor's daughter, testified that if Lady Clare ever saw any of the sisters suffering some temptation or trial, "she called her secretly and consoled her with tears, and sometimes threw herself at her feet" (*Proc* X:5).

Clare referred to the seduction of the world, the necessity of avoiding its pitfalls and breaking with it. At the time of the process for Clare's canonization, Sister Amata, a relative of Clare, acknowledged that Clare "told her she had asked for a special grace for her so she would not allowed to be deceived by the world nor remain in it" (*Proc* IV:1). For Clare, the spiritual life, and therefore divine intimacy, is something to be sought for and guarded with prayer.

The "enemy of humanity" is a perverse power at work in the world against which it is necessary to keep guard. In the Third Letter, nearly five years after Agnes's consecration, Clare assured her that she had "brought to ruin the subtleties of our crafty enemy, the pride that destroys human nature, and the vanity that infatuates human hearts" (3LAg 6). Vigilance was necessary for, Clare asked Agnes, "Who would not dread the treacheries of the enemy of humanity who, through the arrogance of momentary and deceptive glories, attempts to reduce to nothing that which is greater than heaven itself (3LAg 20)?"

Spiritual combat requires deprivation and courage. Clare warned Agnes about the tenacity necessary to persevere in her resolution about the Privilege of Poverty. Clare cautioned Agnes not to agree with "anything that would place a stumbling block for you on the way, so that you may offer your vows to the Most High in the pursuit of that perfection to which the Spirit of the Lord

has called you" (2LAg 14). She insisted, "If anyone would tell you something else or suggest something that would hinder your perfection or seem contrary to your divine vocation, even though you respect him, do not follow his counsel" (2LAg 17).

Clare portrayed the spiritual life as a match between the soul and its adversaries:

You know, I believe, that the kingdom of heaven is promised and given by the Lord only to the poor for she who loves temporal things loses the fruit of love. Such a person cannot serve God and money, for either the one is loved and the other hated, or the one is served and the other despised (cf. Mt 6:24).

You also know that the one who is clothed cannot fight another who is naked, because she is more quickly thrown who gives her adversary a chance to get hold of her, and that one who lives in the glory of earth cannot rule with Christ in heaven.

Again [You know] that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven (Mt 19:24). Therefore, you have cast aside your garments, that is, earthly riches, that you might not be overcome by the one fighting against you [and] you might enter the kingdom of heaven through the straight path and the narrow gate (cf. Mt 7: 13-14) (ILAg 25-29).

What does Clare mean, then, when she praises Agnes because she has "totally abandoned the vanities of this world (4LAg 8)?" Neither the world nor temptation is evil. The deception is to see the world not as a gift from God, but as something to be possessed. After Clare's conversion, while living in the reality of the created world, she understood it as a gift of God's goodness which she can receive and for which she must give thanks. Sin is appropriating what belongs to God, taking for oneself that which has been given to all. ¹⁰ The poor Christ is the one who lived without this sin. Only through poverty can Agnes combat her tendency to possessiveness.

Clare and the Contemporary Church

Clare's spirituality is focused on the poverty of Christ and that of his mother, on "so great and good a Lord, then, on coming in to the Virgin's womb, [who] chose to appear despised, needy and poor in this world" (1LAg 9). The image that Clare constantly held before herself, which she incorporated into her Rule, and which she described for Agnes of Prague is that of the

¹⁰Chinnici, 108.

poor Christ and his poor mother. Clare concludes her Rule with this admonition:

Let the sisters be strictly bound to always have that Cardinal of the Holy Roman Church, who has been delegated by the Lord Pope for the Friars Minor, as Governor, Protector and Corrector, that always submissive and subject at the feet of that holy Church and steadfast in the Catholic faith, we may always observe the poverty and humility of our Lord Jesus Christ and of His holy Mother and the Holy Gospel we have firmly promised. Amen. (RCI 12:12)

For Clare, the church is the poor person, the one who is willing to receive. Francis made this explicit in his *Salutation to the Blessed Virgin*, in addressing her:

Hail, O Lady, holy Queen, Mary, holy Mother of God: You are the virgin made church (SalBVM 1) 11

Francis concluded the salutation with a litany of Aves to the Virgin Mary as the virgin made church:

Hail, His Palace!
Hail, His Tabernacle!
Hail, His Home!
Hail, His Robe!
Hail, His Servant!
Hail, His Mother (SalBVM 4-5)!

Mary is the *domus*, like the dwelling place that Francis was called to repair before the cross of San Damiano. In addressing Agnes, Clare used language indicating the soul as the dwelling place of God:

Indeed, it is now clear that the soul of a faithful person, the most worthy of all creatures because of the grace of God, is greater than heaven itself, since the heavens and the rest of creation cannot contain their Creator and only the faithful soul is [God's] dwelling place and throne, and only this through the charity that the wicked lack. [He who is] the Truth has said: Whoever loves me will be loved by My Father, and I too shall love him, and We shall come to him and make Our dwelling place with him (Jn 14:21, 23) (3LAg 21-23).

The church is the dwelling place of God on earth. Mary, who clothed Jesus with robe of human flesh, is the model of the church. Hilarius Pyfferoen and Optatus Van Asseldonk have shown how the motif of a virgin-made church

¹¹Francis and Clare; the Complete Works, trans. Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M.Cap. and Ignatius C. Brady, O.F.M., New York: Paulist Press, 1982, 149.

was prevalent during the time of Francis and Clare. A sermon on the Annunciation by Psuedo-Hildebert contains the following passage:

In this connection there is a great and marvelous sacrament, that is of the union of Christ and the Church, or of the Word and the soul. For the Virgin Mary—or whatever faithful soul is chaste by the soul's lack of corruption and virginal by its sincerity to the faith—is made the Church. For the Apostle says, 'I betrothed you to Christ to present you as pure bride to her one husband' (2 Cor 11-12). 12

Mary is placed as a paradigm, or sacrament, of the faithful Christian, both of which express the mystery of the Church as the dwelling place of the Word of God. Mary is the model of one who bore the divine life in her body, which is the mission of the church.

By her manner of life and service, Clare was called to glorify God throughout the universal church. In the *Testament*, Clare retold the story of the prophecy of the Poor Ladies, recalling the words of Francis, "Come and help me in the work [of building] the monastery of San Damiano, because ladies will again dwell here who will glorify our heavenly Father throughout His Holy universal Church by their celebrated and holy manner of life" (*TestCl* 13). Further into the *Testament*, Clare once again identifies the Poor Christ with her role in the church:

For this reason, on bended knees and bowing low with both [body and soul], I commend all my sisters, both those present and those to come, the holy Mother the Roman Church, the supreme Pontiff, and, especially, the Lord Cardinal who been appointed for the Order of Friars Minor and for us, that out of love of the God who was placed poor in the crib, lived poor in the world, and remained naked on the cross, [our Protector] may always see to it that his little flock (cf. Lk 12:32) which the Lord Father has begotten in His holy Church by the word and example of our blessed father Francis by following the poverty and humility of His beloved Son and of his glorious Virgin Mother, observe the holy poverty that we have promised to God and our most blessed father Saint Francis. (*TestCl44*-47).

For Clare, being abbess and "mother" meant to receive her poverty which permitted her to receive others as sisters and brothers. To be mother meant to give birth to the Poor Jesus through a holy manner of working. Clare's Privilege of Poverty necessitated that she and the sisters support themselves through the work of their hands. Work is another way of identifying with the

¹²Quoted by Optatus Van Asseldonk, "Maria Santissima e Lo Spirito in San Franceso d'Assisi," in: De Culto mariano saeculis XII-XV, Vol IV, Roma 1980, 413-444; Hilarius Pyfferoen, "Ave... Dei Genetrix, quae es Virgo, Ecclesia facta," in: Laurentianum 12 (1971), 412-434 in: Armstrong 91.

poor of the world, and therefore the poor Christ, for poor persons must work to support themselves. Clare underscores the role of the Poor Ladies in the Third Letter:

[I see, too] that by humility, the virtue of faith, and the strong arms of poverty, you have taken hold of that incomparable treasure hidden in the field of the world and of the human heart (Mt 13:44) with which you have purchased that by Whom all things have been made from nothing. And, to use the words of the Apostle himself in their proper sense, I consider you a co-worker of God Himself (cf. 1 Cor 3:9; Rom 16:3), and a support of the weak members of His ineffable body (3LAg 7-8).

Regis J. Armstrong suggests this passage could express Clare's understanding of the mission of the Poor Ladies in the universal church. 13 No longer working in the hospice Agnes established, her sisters, as contemplatives, continue to have a significant role. Held in the "strong arms of poverty," the Poor Ladies reveal the Poor Christ as the hidden center of their lives. Armstrong holds that the enclosure is a symbolic expression of both the mystery of the pregnant Virgin Mary and of the divine indwelling in the soul of the faithful Christian.14

Themes of germination and fruition and conception and birth dominate spiritual history. Stephen E. Wessley establishes how pregnant women are images of religious life that reflect the reality of the church. 15 The Eucharist is the sacrament of the maternal aspect of the church in which Christ comes into the dwelling place of the soul. As the son of the Father, Christ is the brother of all human beings. Chinnici demonstrates that the Eucharist for Francis was not so much a sign of power as powerlessness. 16 Francis's Admonition on the Body of Christ summarizes this:

See, daily He humbles Himself as when He came to the royal throne into the womb of the Virgin; daily He comes to us in a humble form; daily He comes down from the bosom of the Father upon the altar in the hands of the priest (Adm 1. 16-17).17

¹³Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M.Cap., "Starting Points: Images of Women in the Letters of Clare," in: Collectanea Franciscana, Rome: Instituto Storico Cappuccini, 1992, 88.

¹⁵Stephen E. Wessley, Joachim of Fiore and Monastic Reform, VII, 72, New York: Peter Lang, 1990, in: Armstrong 93.

¹⁶Chinnici, 112.

¹⁷Armstrong and Brady, 26. In note 2, Armstrong relates this text to Psuedo Bernard Cistercian text, Tractatus de Corpore Domini, PL, 184, 1149-1150.

The redemption is accomplished because of the poverty of the Poor Christ. David Flood, O.F.M., concludes that in Franciscan spirituality it is the Eucharist and the redemptive strength of Jesus' humility that enable his followers to live as brothers and sisters. When persons are powerless, weak, and poor in imitation of Jesus, they can turn to others and be subject to them.

The San Damiano Cross

Whether or not Clare actually saw the wounds of Francis, his stigmata was, like the crucified Christ, love made visible. Francis of Assisi was twelve years older than Clare and, while little is recorded of their relationship, after receiving the stigmata in 1224 Francis returned to San Damiano to be cared for by Clare and the Poor Ladies. Francis's health was broken, and because of his near blindness for a time he sought a dark shelter attached to the Monastery of San Damiano. Although he tried to conceal the wounds in his hands and feet and side from his brothers, except for a few intimates, his physical health demanded ministration. If Clare nursed Francis's wounds during the time he was at San Damiano, or if she saw them in 1226 when his body was brought to the Poor Ladies for a final farewell, she would have gained an indelible portrait of what God's love entails. Whatever the source of her human understanding, Clare found her spiritual understanding of love in gazing on the visual image of the crucified Christ.

Clare gazed upon the icon of the crucified Christ in the chapel of San Damiano for more than forty years. According to tradition, the icon of the San Damiano cross is the cross that spoke to Francis in prayer, directing him, "Francis, go, repair my house, which, as you see, is falling completely to ruin." This event of 1205 is a dynamic point in Francis's conversion, for, as if visually captured by the glorious image of Jesus on the cross, Francis understood union with God to mean transformation into the image of the crucified Christ. The San Damiano cross is a twelfth-century Eastern cross, portraying a living figure of Christ, triumphant over death. While the central figure depicts a crucified Christ, the cross contains narrative scenes that move from the passion to divine glory represented by the joyful red, black and gold colors. The evidence of the Four Letters to Agnes reveals that, like Francis,

¹⁸David Flood, Frère François et le mouvement franciscain, 171-72 in: Chinnici, 112.

¹⁹ The Second Life of Saint Francis," St. Francis of Assisi; Omnibus of Sources, Marion Habig, O.F.M., ed., Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983, 370.

²⁰ Two small, perfect bound books have been written on the San Damiano Cross: C. Barret, F.

Clare, in her desire for union with God, also set out in literal imitation of the Crucified.

Like all icons, the San Damiano cross does not depict a moment in human time, but a sequence of events as they exist eternally. Clare's spirituality reflects the spirit of the San Damiano cross, for it is at once centered upon the crucified Christ of time, whose virtues are to be imitated in the human journey, and on the heavenly Jerusalem resplendent in the glory of God. It is as if Clare absorbed the message of suffering and glory on the San Damiano cross and expressed it theologically through her writing. For it is in the union of the human and divine, represented in the mystery of the suffering Christ, that Clare found a symbol for her union with God.

In mystical literature, union with God is frequently expressed as the lovelonging of a bride awaiting the erotic embrace of a lover. In the Song of Songs, a young woman speaks tenderly of her absent lover while awaiting his return. While the poem does not contain anything specifically religious, it was understood as an expression of the relationship between God as Bridegroom and the Jewish nation as bride. ²¹ The Christian tradition adapted the Song of Songs, taking it to represent the relationship between Christ as bridegroom and the church as bride. In Christian mysticism, Christ, the Word of God, is the Bridegroom and the individual soul is the female speaker in the poem. While earlier Christian writers wrote commentaries on the Song of Songs, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) brought its language of passionate love into mysticism.

Mystics following Bernard, including Clare of Assisi, continued to be shaped by his vision of the relationship of the individual soul and the divine Word of God as a spiritual marriage between the human bride and the heavenly bridegroom. Like Bernard's, Clare's spirituality and mysticism are Christocentric. Bernard suggested praying before an image of the Incarnate God because the source of Wisdom is in Christ's life, death and resurrection. In her Third Letter, written after her body was broken with illness, Clare declared that she had "at last what under heaven I have desired," and she expressed her joy to Agnes because she too had been "helped by a special gift

Bodeur, C. Mahu, A. Perrin, *The Crucifix of San Damian; a Way of Conversion*, trans. Sr. Veronique Gill, Santa Maria degli Angeli: Tipographia Portizuncula, 1988; Marc Picard, O.F.M., Cap., The *Icon of the Christ of San Damiano*, Assisi: Casa Editrice Francescana, 1989.

²¹See the section, "My Soul as Bride" in: Nelson Pike, Mystic Union; An Essay in the Phenomenology of Mysticism, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992, 66-73.

²²Harvey Egan, S.J., An Anthology of Christian Mysticism, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991, 166.

of wisdom from the mouth of God" (3LAg 5-6). Gifted from the mouth of God, Clare invites Agnes to contemplation by means of the affections, "So that you too may feel what His friends feel as they taste the hidden sweetness that God...has reserved from the beginning for those who love" (3LAg 14).

Clare followed Bernard in centering her spirituality on Christ and wisdom because the most significant truth is comprehended in mystical prayer. Because love is a form of knowing, Bernard summarized the ascent of the soul to God as the desire "to know Christ and him crucified." Identification with the mystery of Redemption and imitation of the humiliation of the crucified Christ promise heavenly rewards: "If you suffer with him, you will reign with him, if you weep with him, you shall rejoice with him: if you die with him on the cross of tribulation, you shall possess heavenly mansions in the splendor of the saints and in the Book of Life your name shall be called glorious among [all]" (2LAg 21-22). What is startling in Clare's mysticism is her desire, not only to know, but also to imitate the God of the cross.

Clare viewed Agnes's consecration as an espousal to the Lord Jesus Christ, "...as someone zealous for the holist poverty, in a spirit of great humility and the ardent charity, you have held fast to the footprints (1Pt 2:22) of Him to Whom you have merited to be joined as a Spouse" (2LAg 7). Clare's Second Letter, written in 1235 when Agnes was under pressure to surrender the ideal of poverty, encouraged Agnes and the Poor Ladies to persevere in their way of perfection. ²⁴ For Clare, the Passion of Christ is evidence that temporal suffering is transformed into eternal glory.

Espoused to the Crucified

Clare's spirituality centered around the two central mysteries of the Christian faith, the Incarnation and the Redemption. As she considered the birth of Jesus and the way the Virgin Mother carried him in the little enclosure of her womb, Clare came to the understanding that it is the privilege of each soul to be a dwelling place for God. Mary is the Christ bearer who is her model.

²³Quoted in: Egan, 167.

²⁴Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M.Cap., ed. and trans. Clare of Assisi: Early Documents, New York: Paulist Press, 1988, 39. In his headnote to this letter Armstrong provides the historical context. On May 18, 1235, Pope Gregory IX, in an attempt to provide some material security for the Monastery in Prague, issued the papal degree, Cum relicta saeculi, which united the hospice and monastery in Prague "to guarantee the support of the entire enterprise." While such a move would have given material support for the Poor Ladies of the monastery, it also would have jeopardized their desire to live Clare's Privilege of Poverty. This letter is Clare's encouragement to Agnes to be resolute in her conviction about the Privilege of Poverty.

Because of her idea of giving birth to God in the soul and because of her many references of the role of Christ's mother in the redemption, Clare is called the footprint of Mary in the Legend.

Clare's Letters carry Bernard of Clairvaux's use of bridal imagery to new depths. Clare gazed on Christ crucified on the cross, and desired to participate in his suffering and death on the cross. Union with God for Clare meant union with a God who suffered: for Clare, imitation of Jesus included imitating the "ineffable" charity of the cross. Clare brought maturity to her understanding of what it meant to be espoused to Jesus, and that meant more than the untested love of a bride; it meant surrender to love in a lifelong commitment of "untold burdens."

In his introduction to Claire d'Assise: Un message de lumière, a commemorative volume published for the eighth centenary anniversary of the birth of Clare of Assisi, Thadee Matura points to the uniqueness of Clare among the mystics of the Middle Ages.²⁵ While Clare's writing employs traditional nuptial imagery, her mysticism is original in that she identifies her spouse by his human poverty, suffering and humility. The metaphorical spouse described by Clare to Agnes of Prague at the time of her religious consecration is a crucified lover: "Your Spouse, though more beautiful than the children of men (Ps 44:3), became, for your salvation, the lowest of men, was despised, struck, scourged untold times throughout His entire body, and then died amid the suffering of the Cross" (2LAg 20).²⁶

Earlier, Bernard of Clairvaux brought to spirituality a new emphasis on the humanity of Christ with love as its center. He taught that the invisible God assumed human flesh in order to "recapture the affections" of humans by drawing us to the love of Christ in his humanity which incites spiritual love. Clare's teaching develops his Christocentric spirituality and the use of the affections in prayer in a bold new way. The stigmata of Francis of Assisi provides an image of a mystic transformed by love of the Crucified.

Clare's writings are the words of another mystic who is united to a crucified lover. While passages in earlier mystical writers provide insight into the way of seraphic love, the words of Clare outline the mystical path that leads to transformation in Christ crucified, as dramatically portrayed in the flesh of

²⁵Thadee Matura, "Claire, une femme libre," Claire d'Assise: Un message de lumière, Strasbourg; Editions du Signe, 1991, 1-2.

²⁶Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M.Cap., ed. and trans., Clare of Assisi: Early Documents. New York: Paulist Press, 1988, 42. All references to Clare's writing are to this edition.

²⁷Egan 168.

Francis's wounds. Whereas in the *Canticle of the Sun*, Francis translates his interior world into words, but his body reveals his mystical experience. In a sense, Francis provides an image of Franciscan mysticism, and Clare provides words about her lived experience of the suffering Christ.

Clare instructed Agnes of Prague in the way of contemplative prayer, or transformation. Clare's formula for prayer is threefold: *intuere*, gaze; *considera*, consider; and *contemplare*, contemplate. In her Third Letter to Agnes, Clare explicitly stated that transformation happens through contemplation: "And transform your whole being into the image of the Godhead Itself through contemplation" (3LAg 13). Although Clare drew upon biblical images of the soul united to God as spouse, she envisioned the contemplative gaze focused on the crucified Lover.

The Tradition of the Imago Dei

Clare's explanation to Agnes follows the church's traditional position on Trinitarian exemplarism. Eric College traces the development of the concept of the *Imago Dei* from the church Fathers to the Middle Ages, recounting how Augustine borrowed the notion of the *regio disimilitudinus* from Plotinus, who argued that God's guidance was needed if the earth were not to plunge into the "region of unlikeness." In the Fourth Letter, Clare provides a description of the region of likeness to God that is the goal of the soul's journey in her description of the heavenly Jerusalem as the "mirror without blemish."

In her seminal study, "Backgrounds of the Title Speculum in Medieaval Literature," Ritamary Bradley comments on the widespread use of the Latin term for mirror in the writing of the Middle Ages. Bradley traces the steps in the development of the speculum tradition, illustrating the variations on the twofold meaning, "to show the world what it is and...to point out what it should be." Bradley finds that since the mirror is always used to imply paragons, there is difficulty in assuming that the use of the medieval mirror is influenced by scriptural references. Since Saint Paul's text from I Corinthians 13:12 refers to enigmatic mirrors and the text from the Epistle to St. James concerns a man who saw his face in a glass and forgot what manner of man he

²⁸Eric College, *The Medieval Mystics of England*, London: John Murray, 1962, 21.

²⁹Saturday, January 30, 1779 in: The British Essayists, A. Chalmers, ed., Boston, 1856, 26 quoted by Ritamary Bradley, "Backgrounds of the Title Speculum in Medieval Literature," in: Speculum, 29 (1954), 100.

was, the Pauline usage does not correspond to the common medieval figurative use of the mirror.

A key text in Saint Augustine's commentary, Ennaratio in psalmum 103, extends the model to include the book of Scripture as the mirror of knowledge. Here the mirror is a paragon for right living, "when it is said that God's commands, whether read or recalled to memory, are seen as in a mirror, with a reference to the man in Saint James Epistle who beheld his face in a mirror and went off forgetful of his state." Bradley found another variation on the mirror as a paragon for holy living in Saint Augustine's rule for religious women, which was later adapted for monks. The image of what the monk should be was circulated under the title Speculum, which closed with the injunction, "That you may see yourself in this little book as in a mirror and may not neglect anything through forgetfulness, let it be read to you once a week." Following Augustine, the Rule of Saint Benedict makes a variety of applications of mirror, such as following the tenets of scripture and doing works that are useful for others.

Gregory of Nyssa (c335-394) is one of the most prolific pre-Augustine writers on the figurative meaning of *speculum*. He describes the mirror of the soul as able to be turned either toward the sensible or the superior world, that is, towards temporal or heavenly things. Gregory points out that virtuous lives reflect divine beauty, as a mirror makes the rays of the sun visible, although it is too bright to look at directly. Each adorns itself with the beauty proper according to its rank, in a descending subordination, becoming a kind of mirror of a mirror.³³

In the Letters to Agnes of Prague, Clare employs the term *speculum* in its second medieval usage, as characterized by Margot Schmidt. In the Letters to Agnes, mirror is primarily used in an "instructive" sense; in her *Testament*, Clare uses mirror in the "exemplary" sense, for she exhorts the Poor Ladies to be examples for other as mirrors of the mirror of God.³⁴

For the Lord Himself has placed us not only as a form for others in being and example and mirror, but even for our sisters whom the Lord has called to our way

³⁰Bradley, 103.

³¹ Bradley, 104.

³² Bradley, 104.

³³Bradley, 104.

³⁴Margot Schmidt, Miroir, in: Dictionnaire de spiritualité, ascétique et mystique, doctrine et bistoire, X, 1296-1303.

of life as well, that they in turn might be a mirror and an example to those living in the world. (TestCl 21)

The *Testament* was written during the period of time that Clare was writing her *Rule*; according to their purpose, both documents direct the Poor Ladies in a way of life that provides service for others. The goal of the contemplative life is conversion through imitation of the virtues of Christ, and interior transformation in order to reflect the face of Christ in the world.

While the wounds of the stigmata on Francis's body were a mirror of Christ, he never used the term *speculum* in his writings. In Clare's writings, *speculum* appears twelve times.³⁵ Matura concludes that the spirituality of Francis is nearer to its biblical and liturgical roots, while Clare's use of nuptial imagery and her Christological spirituality is marked by the spiritual currents of her time, especially the affective piety championed by Bernard of Clairvaux.³⁶ The love that inflamed Clare and the Poor Ladies inflames others. The clearest reflection of God's love for humanity is the Word Incarnate. As a mirror of the invisible God, Christ of the crucifix became the center of Clare's mystical journey.

Clare had a fondness for concrete images, for the Incarnate Word is the way to reveal the Father. Jesus told his followers to look beyond the garment of his humanity through the spirit. It is essential to see beyond the historical Christ and the appearance of bread and wine in order to have faith in the unseen divinity of Jesus. Clare invites Agnes to see with eyes of faith, that is to "gaze" in order to move from the visible to the invisible.

Timothy J. Johnson argues that Clare's frequent use of the word *contemplation* brings Clare's approach to prayer using the imagery of vision:

Etymologically speaking, contemplation connotes an experience marked by visual perception (Leclercq 85-87).... [Clare] employs the metaphor of the mirror nine times as she advises Agnes how to pray. Clare's understanding of the visual aspect of contemplation is nuanced by the use of other words, such as *intuere*, (gaze), *considera* (consider), *lucis* (light), *attende* (look), and *vide* (see) which appear throughout her letters to Agnes.³⁷

³⁵Schmidt reports that H. Grabes identified 250 medieval texts including the title word Speculum.
³⁶"Introduction" in: Becker, Godet and Matura, 64.

³⁷ "Visual Imagery and Contemplation in Clare of Assisi's Letters to Agnes of Prague," in: *Mystics Quarterly*, December 1993, 162.

Clare's Use of the Mirror

It is through the imitation of Jesus, whom Agnes has taken as a spouse, that she will be taken to the heavenly bridal chamber. Clare instructs Agnes:

This is that perfection with which the King himself will take you to Himself in the heavenly bridal chamber where He is seated in glory on a starry throne, because you have despised the splendor of an earthly kingdom and considered of little value the offers of an imperial marriage. Instead, as someone zealous for the holiest poverty, in a spirit of great humility and the most ardent charity, you have held fast to the footprints (1 Pt 2:22) of Him to Whom you have merited to be joined as a Spouse $(2LAg\ 5-7)$.

In the Fourth Letter, Clare's theme of imitation of the poor crucified Christ is developed more fully, and explicitly related to the mysteries of the humanity of Jesus in the Incarnation and the suffering of Jesus in the Redemption. Clare instructs Agnes to pray daily before the image of the Crucified as the source of her personal transformation. For in the image of the crucified Christ, the soul will find her own image and the virtues of poverty, humility and charity.

For Clare, to gaze daily upon the face of the Crucified is the way to spiritual transformation, because Christ is the invisible God made visible. Clare evokes the happiness of the "sacred banquet," where the vision of God will bless "all the citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem: which, since it is the splendor of eternal glory, is the brilliance of eternal light and the mirror without blemish (4LAg 13-14)." Clare's source of the image of heaven as the "mirror without blemish" is the book of Wisdom.

Gaze upon that mirror each day, O Queen and Spouse of Jesus Christ, and continually study your face within it, that you may adorn yourself within and without with beautiful robes.... Indeed, blessed poverty, holy humility, and inexpressible charity are reflected in that mirror, as with the grace of God, you can contemplate them throughout the entire mirror (4LAg 15-16, 18-19).

Clare develops the *speculum* topos in a new way by making an analogy between the three dimensions of a medieval mirror and the three virtues of poverty, humility, and charity. These virtues, in turn, are linked with virtues demonstrated by Jesus in his Incarnation and in his redemptive suffering, the ultimate act of charity. The obscurity of the border of the mirror is lessened as contemplation leads into the clear image of God at the center of the mirror,

³⁸Armstrong 40, n. 5, attributes Clare's reference to the Liturgy of the Hours for the feast of the Assumption, August 14, Lauds, II, Antiphon.

the crucified spouse. Clare identifies poverty with the birth of Jesus at the border of the mirror, and humility with the suffering of Jesus in the passion at the surface of the mirror. The image of God to be imitated is in the clear center of the mirror, where the crucified Christ presents a visual image of the depth of divine love.

Similar to Bernard's theology, Clare instructed Agnes in an intelligent, affective understanding of faith as a preparation for contemplation. Bernard drew an analogy between kissing Christ's feet, hands, and mouth and the purgative, illuminative, and unitive way. The acquisition of virtue is the ascetical preparation necessary for the mystical kiss of the mouth. But prayer, the proximate preparation, must be affective, for the Word who comes to visit will be clothed in beauty, in every feature the soul's bridegroom.³⁹

Clare's meditation on the border of the mirror recalls the mystery of the Incarnation:

Look at the border of this mirror, that is, the poverty of Him who was placed in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes.

O marvelous humility!
O astonishing poverty!
The king of angels,
the Lord of heaven and earth,
is laid in a manger (4LAg 19-21)!

The suffering and humiliations of the Redemption are identified with the surface of the mirror:

Then, at the surface of the mirror, consider the holy humility, the blessed poverty, the untold labors and burdens that He endured for the redemption of the whole human race (4LAg 22).

The clearest visible sign of God's love is in the center of the mirror, the crucified Lover who redeemed humanity on the wood of the cross:

Then, in the depth of this same mirror, contemplate the ineffable charity that led Him to suffer on the wood of the Cross and to die there the most shameful kind of death.

Therefore, that Mirror, suspended on the wood of the Cross, urged all those who passed by to consider, saying;

³⁹Egan 169 refers to Bernard of Clairvaux—On the Song of Songs, II, Sermon 32, no.3, Trans. Kilian Walsh, O.C.S.O., Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1971, 135-136.

'All you who pass by the way, look and see if there is any suffering like my suffering.' (4LAg 23-25)

Contemplation of God in the Mirror of the crucified Christ suspended on the cross inflames the soul with love, for Clare concludes:

From this moment, then, O Queen of our heavenly King, let yourself be inflamed more strongly with the fervor of charity. As you further contemplate [God's] ineffable delights, eternal riches and honors, and sigh for them in the great desire and love of your heart, may you cry out:

Draw me after you,
we will run in the fragrance of your perfumes,
O heavenly spouse!
I will run and not tire,
until you bring me into the wine cellar,
until your left hand is under my head
and your right hand will completely embrace me happily, [and] you will
kiss me with the happiest kiss of Your mouth (4LAg 27-32).

Clare's expression of mystical union as represented in the Song of Songs appears here in her writings; the earthly journey, guided by God's left hand, is completed in heaven by the embrace by the right hand of God. Union with God as Logos is the kiss of wisdom, the "special gift of wisdom from the mouth of God," that was Clare's source of joy in her Third Letter to Agnes of Prague. Clare sought mystical union with the Logos of God, the crucified Christ.

Clare identified the human, suffering and crucified Jesus in the personification of Wisdom from the Old Testament as "that spotless mirror of God" (Wis 7:26). 40 The figure of Wisdom is the mirror of God; the Word of God is the mirror of God. It is the figure of Wisdom, "the mirror without blemish," which reflects the glory of God and radiates both wisdom and knowledge of God. The Wisdom of God is the crucified Spouse of Clare's mysticism. In introducing her lyrical passages on the Incarnation and Redemption, Clare identifies that Mirror, suspended on the wood of the cross, as the splendor of the heavenly Jerusalem. Clare's words call to mind the glory of the San Damiano cross.

By whose fragrance the dead are revived, Whose glorious vision will bless all the citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem:

⁴⁰For a full development of Clare's use of the mirror, see Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M.Cap., "Clare of Assisi: The Mirror Mystic," in: *The Cord*, July-August 1985, 195-202.

which, since it is the splendor of eternal glory, is the brilliance of eternal light and the mirror without blemish (4LAg 13-14).

Wisdom is the created mystical gift of God because Wisdom and the Logos

In her Third Letter, Clare makes clear how transformation of the soul takes place through contemplation of the crucified Christ. Clare brings to mind an image of the Trinity as an image of the three faculties of the person. She literally directs Agnes to let go of her human nature in order to melt into the nature of God:

> Place your mind before the mirror of eternity! Place your soul in the brilliance of glory! Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance! And transform your entire being into the image of the Godhead...through contemplation (3LAg 12-13).

Contemplative prayer is the way the human soul is transformed into the Imago Dei. The face to face sight of God is the goal of the mystical life.

Conclusion

The mystical life pursues an interior awareness of the reception and presence of divine life. Clare's mystical writings reveal that she experienced her inner life as a mirror of the divine likeness, the indwelling of the Trinity, and the re-birth of God in her soul. Clare comprehended the mystical coming of Jesus who told the apostle Jude that he would not reveal himself to them, because his message was that he would come and dwell in those who love him and accept his word.

Clare's writing reveals what Saint Bonaventure taught, that love, although filled with suffering and pain, is transformed though contemplative prayer. God is the giver of eternal life: "You know, I believe, that the kingdom of heaven is promised and given by the Lord only to the poor, (cf. Mt 5:3) for she who loves temporal things loses the fruit of love" (1LAg 25). Clare gives some practical hints for the mystical life: to exchange the things of time for those of eternity, the things of earth for those of heaven. Gazing on the crucified is a beginning.

⁴¹See Elizabeth A. Johnson's chapter, "Jesus-Sophia," in: She Who Is: the Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse, New York: Crossroad, 1992, 150-69.

In his study of Clare's visual language, Johnson places Clare's spirituality in the kataphatic mystical tradition:

The word kataphatic stems from the Greek katapheni (to assent, to say yes). The kataphatic approach to God maintains that there is discernible similarity between creatures and Creator. Consequently, it is possible to know and assent to divine realities because creatures are analogically related to the Creator. By means of created forms, icons, images, and symbols, those who enter into prayer can come to a deep experience of the divine presence in the world. Images drawn from the material world and employed in contemplative prayer serve as doorways leading to the uncreated God. 42

Although Clare favors the use of visual vocabulary, Johnson demonstrates how her approach to God employs other senses:

Clare expresses the intimacy of her encounter with Christ by using relational images such as spouse and bridegroom. She appeals to sense knowledge when she describes the immediacy of the divine presence in terms of taste, sweetness, feeling, embracing, kissing, speaking, fragrant perfumes, gazing and seeing. This use of sensory and interpersonal imagery is accompanied by forceful affective language; desire, sighs, crying out, rejoicing, happiness, and weeping are all constitutive elements of the vocabulary Clare uses in her description of the human encounter with the divine in kataphatic contemplation. 43

All Christian faith is grounded on the experience that God, who is Spirit, is at work in the world to renew all creatures through the power of the indwelling and the history of Jesus. Clare, like Francis, experienced how the Word who pervades the universe came to dwell among suffering humanity. Her message of wholeness through redemptive love provides hope as the struggle of human history continues.

Clare wrote about mystical union with the Crucified with the passionate love of God by which the wounds of the crucifixion were written in the flesh of Francis. Themes of union with God expressed in spousal imagery, the image of the Crucified, and the eschatological promise of a heavenly Jerusalem coexist in Clare's writing, just as these mysteries were portrayed simultaneously on the crucifix of San Damiano. While the earthly passage, also in imitation of Jesus, is one of birth, suffering, death and resurrection, its central reality is the Crucifixion, Jesus' act of salvation. Clare sought union with the Christ of his crucified moment of history. Love made visible in the human

⁴²Johnson, 166.

⁴³Johnson, 176.

Jesus of the cross was a sign of hope for Clare and her assurance of eternal life. For Clare of Assisi to imitate Jesus was to be espoused to the Crucified.

Summary

Clare of Assisi (1193-1253) lived during the time when women's religious movements and feminine spirituality flourished. While Clare's union with the humanity of Christ is expressed through spousal language, popularized by Bernard of Clairvaux, Clare makes a unique contribution to mystical thought in envisioning the Crucified as her spouse. For forty years, Clare contemplated a glorious image of the crucified Christ on the cross of San Damiano. Themes of the Crucified and the glory of the heavenly Jerusalem coexist in her mystical texts, just as they are simultaneously represented on the San Damiano icon.

Because Jesus begged even his human flesh from the Virgin Mary, Clare's identity with God began with the poverty of the crib and the cross. Her understanding of poverty, like that of Francis, influenced her attitude toward the deceptions of the world and her place in the church as an enclosed woman. Clare brought the use of the medieval topos of the *speculum* to her contemplation of the cross and, desiring union, described a spousal mysticism with a crucified lover. The mirror of the invisible God, reflected in the crucified Christ, is the core of Clare's mysticism. For Clare, transformation in God meant imitation and spousal union with the Poor Crucified.