

**Clare, Agnes and the First Sisters:  
from the "Pauperes Dominae" of San Damiano  
to the Poor Clares**

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*Chiara, Agnese e le prime consorelle: dalle 'Pauperes Dominae'  
di S. Damiano alle Clarisse*

*Movimento religioso femminile e francescanesimo nel secolo XIII  
(Assisi, 1980), 167-91.*

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**T**he little group of women who gathered around Clare at San Damiano, and whose story is still in large part hidden and underground, was perhaps the richest, certainly the best-known spring of the whole broad women's religious movement which was active both in Italy and in the other countries of Europe between the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth century.

This restless movement pressed on and tried new forms of religious expression, but it was unable to find either space or a voice for itself and its own more profound quest within the already existing orders. The story of this movement is still to be studied and discovered; it is inseparably bound to the cultural and spiritual growth that women in those centuries sought principally in religious life.

These groups were rooted in the actual situations in which they arose. They proposed a silent life of work and humble manual labor, in houses that became meeting places and places for spreading the Gospel in the very heart of the city, or in areas very close to it. So, even though the group of Clare and her companions certainly came into being through the spirit of Francis it put down its roots in a ground already turned up and disturbed. A myriad of these female groups sprang up throughout north-central Italy—something that will impress even those who only skim through the *Bullarium Franciscanum*. On

the other hand, it is difficult to ascertain how much this was due to the Franciscan order itself. Everything allows us to suppose that the Franciscan movement acted as a catalyst for an already existing movement. There are, as we know, few contemporary testimonies to the life led during the first few years by Clare, Agnes and the first sisters at San Damiano that catch the group at its original form and not in the forms that were imposed on it by later regulations.

Though this is a problem common to the history of all those groups whose lives were not extinguished at their birth, it is a particularly thorny one for the women at San Damiano, who received their rule from Cardinal Ugolino—that is, from outside—after only a very few years of life. Jacques de Vitry is one of these very few voices which speak of the group at San Damiano in the first few years: in his well-known letter,<sup>1</sup> written from Genoa in October 1216, this sensitive churchman, who was very attentive to the religious expressions of his time, saw the Minors as a single phenomenon, characterized by a very lively religious fervor and by rigorous poverty. He does distinguish between ways of life: that of the brothers was mobile, that of the women was fixed in one place; but nothing allows us to glimpse the specifically monastic or cloistered character that the women's movement would very soon assume.

The very term *monasterium*, which indicated the traditional religious community, seems to have been dropped. At times it was avoided, as in the *Privilege of Poverty*. In his text, Gregory IX—who perhaps was following the previous text by Innocent III—speaks of “*vos*” and of “*ecclesia vestra*,” as Grundmann rightly noted.<sup>2</sup> Others, like Jacques de Vitry, replaced *monasterium* with the term *hospitium*, in the very clear awareness that they were face-to-face with a new reality.<sup>3</sup> It seems to me that Chapter 6 of Clare's rule, reproduced in its essential lines in her Testament, and the testimony of her first companions in the Canonization Process, define very clearly the heart of Clare's original plan. First, a form of life founded on radical poverty, which Clare and her companions, like Francis, translated into the sharing of the lot of the poor of the time. They did manual labor and when it was necessary,

<sup>1</sup>“Iacobi Vitriacensis de beato Francisco eiusque societate testimonia. Epsitula I data Ianuae a. 1216 Oct.,” in H. Boehmer, *Analekten zur Geschichte des Franciscus von Assisi* (Tübingen, 1930), p. 67 [translated in Marion A. Habig, ed. *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies: An Omnibus of Sources* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973, p. 1608-1609. From here on, this will be referred to as *Omnibus*—Trans.]

<sup>2</sup>H. Grundmann, *Movimenti religiosi nel Medioevo* (Bologna, 1974), p. 132, note 149.

<sup>3</sup>“Iacobi Vitriacensis de beato Francisco,” p. 67 [*Omnibus*, p. 1608].

begged; that is, they accepted the total dependence on others that characterized the life of the poor. Second, a common life in which they sought an accord in charity and through humility; this is the essential spirit of Franciscan minority ("to live and converse humbly and be of one mind in charity"<sup>4</sup> is the last will of Francis for the ladies of San Damiano). Third, a simple, not intellectual form of prayer; prayer born from an interiorization of the Gospel and from a profound relationship with all of creation. Fourth, a loving, serene attention in service to all the suffering and poverty they found around them.

The very wide variety of people who were constantly running to San Damiano, burdened and afflicted, looking for help and support, is a testimony to how deeply Clare and her sisters were rooted in the reality of Assisi. From the same source we learn of the common conviction in Assisi that Clare and her sisters had been placed there for the safeguarding of the city,<sup>5</sup> which in a memory that very soon became tinted with the coloring of legend, they had saved from the "Saracens," that is from the soldiers of Frederick II.

This group, made up, as Bougerol has stressed in a recent paper,<sup>6</sup> by women from the most powerful families of Assisi, lived for a number of years without feeling the need for a rule. The *formula vitae*<sup>7</sup> given to them by Francis, which was inserted in part—and certainly in its essential part—in Clare's Rule<sup>8</sup> and in her Testament,<sup>9</sup> puts life according to the Gospel and Francis's concern for them at the center of the project of the women of San Damiano. Along with this formula a set of "observances of San Damiano" were established, born from the experience of the group and from the teach-

<sup>4</sup>"Vivere et humiliter conversari et esse unanimes in charitate," *Speculum perfectionis seu S. Francisci Assiensis Legenda antiquissima auctore fratre Leone*, ed. P. Sabatier, chap. 90 (Paris, 1898), 180-81 [*Omnibus*, p. 1223]. The text that Francis is said to have composed for the ladies of San Damiano has now been edited by G. Boccali, "Canto di esortazione di S. Francesco per le 'Poverelle' di S. Damiano," in *CF* 48 (1978), pp. 5-29.

<sup>5</sup>Z. Lazzeri, "Il processo di canonizzazione di santa Chiara di Assisi," in *AFH* 13 (1920), test. XVIII, 6. [Trans. in Regis J. Armstrong, OFM Cap., *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents* (St. Bonaventure, New York: Franciscan Institute, 1993), p. 183; hereafter referred to as Armstrong].

<sup>6</sup>J. G. Bougerol, "Il reclutamento sociale delle Clarisse di Assisi," in *Les Ordres Mendicants et la ville en Italie centrale* (v. 1220-1350), "Actes de la Table Ronde (Rome 27-28 avril 1978)," in *MÇlanges de l'école Française de Rome. Moyen Age-Temps Modernes* 89 (1977), pp. 629-632.

<sup>7</sup>K. Esser, *Opuscula Sancti Francisci Assiensis* (Bibliotheca Franciscana Ascetica Medii Aevi, 12), Grottaferrata 1978, p. 162. [*Omnibus*, p. 76].

<sup>8</sup>G. Boccali, *Concordantiae verbales opusculorum S. Francisci et S. Clarae Assiensium*, S. Maria Angelorum—Assisi 1976: *Clarae Regula* 6, 2-4. [Armstrong, pp. 71-72].

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, *Clarae Testamentum* 20, 33 [Armstrong, p. 58].

ing which Francis gave them in his letters and notes, those "many writings,"<sup>10</sup> which Clare spoke of in her Testament.

The relationship between Francis and Clare and her sisters was rather intense during the first years (probably before the "constitutions" of Ugolino), when Francis supported this little group of women by his presence and his preaching. Francis's decision, recorded by Thomas of Celano in his *Second Life*,<sup>11</sup> to rely for one of his sermons on only a simple, silent penitential act, is a testimony to how much his sermons were loved. He outlined for them, as has been said, a way of life; he sent companions to them, though he did not always thoroughly weigh their vocation, as Clare was perhaps better able to do because of the keener awareness she had reached in the common life. Their relationship was based on their awareness of the common spirit animating them and of their happy harmony in the reading of the Gospel "without a gloss." For Francis, Clare was the "Christian woman" because he saw the Gospel expressed, lived and illuminated in her as he did in no one else, and he turned to her and her companions during periods of darkness, when he felt uncertain about the road he was called to follow. Clare, in her turn, recalled Francis in her *Testament* as a pillar, her only consolation after Christ and her support. She felt that she was his "little plant," which he had brought to birth in the spirit of Christ, in which both felt rooted.

Francis never felt that the relationship that bound him and his brothers with the nuns of San Damiano should be extended to the whole movement that had its beginning in the project lived by Clare and her sisters. This was a clear and radical rejection which, though it was located on the line followed by so many other religious orders which thought the spiritual care of nuns a burden and danger for the spiritual and organizational life, as Grundmann has clearly demonstrated,<sup>12</sup> was perhaps more specifically motivated by the fear of a transformation of the Order of Friars Minor into a monastic order, a transformation that this care would have involved or at least favored. This problem of Francis's attitude to women's religious life requires detailed analysis and further study and I can only mention it briefly here.

The Poor Ladies of San Damiano, in their profound, though discreet, relationship with Francis, and in the radical way they lived the Gospel life, very quickly became a reference point for groups of women, already estab-

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 34 [Armstrong, p. 58].

<sup>11</sup>Thomas of Celano, "Vita Secunda S. Francisci," in *AF* 10 (1920-1941), cap. 157, num. 207 [Omnibus, pp. 527-28].

<sup>12</sup>Grundmann, *Movimenti*, passim.

lished, or then being established, who wanted to live according to new forms of religious life. A very interesting network of relationships was spontaneously created among these groups, the central hub of which was the women at San Damiano.

This theme has been treated in detail in an article by Rusconi, but it must be mentioned here, because it sheds light on the actual character of the life of these women, who certainly were not limited to a narrow view because they were cloistered in San Damiano. In reality, they had such an intense relationship with these other groups of women that we can glimpse in Clare and her first companions the very same apostolic impulse that Francis had, and a confident expectation of a evangelical regeneration of humanity, which through them would penetrate even the lives of women. As a number of the testimonies in the canonization process show, Clare's companions were constantly leaving to "form" not only the neighboring monasteries in Umbria and Tuscany, but also those in northern Italy, and, spreading outward in ever-widening rings, the Bohemian, German, French and Spanish monasteries.

In was in this way that Balvina founded the monastery of Valle Gloria of Spello,<sup>13</sup> and became its abbess, where she had as her companion for a year Sister Pacifica del Guelfuccio;<sup>14</sup> while another Balvina, this one from Coccorano, had been sent for a year and a half to the monastery of Arezzo.<sup>15</sup> Again, Clare's sister Agnes, in addition to "forming" the monastery of Monticelli near Florence in 1219, was in Verona, Padua, Venice, and Mantua between 1224 and 1238. The monastery of Ulm also originated from San Damiano, according to the chronicle of Nicholas Glassberger.<sup>16</sup> And these are only some of the contacts. It would be interesting to follow the history of the various groups, as their corresponding monastic foundations emerged, (in studies similar to the very careful and serious one by Andenna for San Pietro di Cavagnetto near Novara).<sup>17</sup> In this way we might find out what influence the presence of the women of San Damiano had on the choice the women in these foundations made among the variety of forms of life and lines of action, and determine if the monasteries "formed" by Clare's companions were those that most followed a life of rigorous poverty. It is difficult not to imagine a profound

<sup>13</sup>Lazzeri, "Il processo," test. I, 15 [Armstrong, p. 140].

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., test. I, 14 [Armstrong, p. 139].

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., test. VII, 11 [Armstrong, p. 163].

<sup>16</sup>Nicolaus Glassberger, "Chronica," in *AF* 1 (1887), p. 572.

<sup>17</sup>G. Andenna, "Le Clarisse nel Novarese (1252-1300)," in *AFH* 67 (1974), pp. 185-267.

connection, for example, between the sisters of San Damiano and those of San Severino di Colperseto, to whom Francis was bound in an affectionate relationship—he had entrusted a little ewe lamb to them, as Thomas of Celano reports in one of most simple and charming stories in his *First Life*.<sup>18</sup> It was also while visiting them that he met and converted Pacifico, “who in the world was called the King of Verses.”<sup>19</sup> In 1231 these women seemed to be faithful to a line of rigorous poverty—“placing their contentment in poverty”—as we learn from a bull of Gregory IX, who, concerned with assuring them economic help, promised an indulgence of 40 days to whoever would provide for them.<sup>20</sup>

The spreading of the group to the surrounding area already in the very first years seems moreover to be confirmed by a document of 1217, from which it appears that Clare herself, together with two companions, Marsebilia and Cristiana, acquired a piece of land in Foligno to found a monastery there, where Marsebilia later remained as abbess.<sup>21</sup>

Faced with the great variety, richness and liveliness of these groups, the Church felt compelled to intervene, to give directions, norms and a single form to a movement that, although fervid, risked appearing troubled and confused and such as to question, among other things, the condition and position of women in the Church, and in the religious life in particular. The movement actually seemed to be assuming the dimensions of a new order—and this after the Fourth Lateran Council had established that no new orders could be founded in addition to those that already existed.

Here began for Clare and the group at San Damiano the long struggle for fidelity to an intuition which they loved all the more intensely because they had found it living in the person of Francis. Fidelity to the life to which they felt called was mixed with and became one with fidelity to Francis, as we can very clearly see in all Clare's writings. While we recall Francis's very determined resistance to those who asked him to conform to the rules of the other religious orders, the suffering and silent struggle carried on by Clare is perhaps even harsher. It led her to carry out a painful mining operation, in which she sought the essential, the heart of her vocation, and distinguished it from those things that did not conform to her sensibility and the line she

<sup>18</sup>Thomas of Celano, “Vita prima S. Francisci,” in *AF* X (1926-1941), cap. XXVIII, num. 78 [English translation in *Omnibus*, pp. 293-94].

<sup>19</sup>Thomas of Celano, *Second Life*, cap. LXXII, num 106 [*Omnibus*, pp. 448-50].

<sup>20</sup>*Epitome B.F.*, num. 77.

<sup>21</sup>M. Sensi, “Le Clarisse a Foligno nel secolo XIII,” *CF* 47 (1977), pp. 349-363.

followed, but never affected the deeper things that she felt could not be given up.

Certainly neither fasting, nor vigils, nor prayer purified Clare as much as did this secret and profound struggle that marked her whole life. She would write in her *Second Letter* to Agnes of Bohemia, between 1235 and 1238, asking her to adopt her own constant attitude:

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 must respect him, do not follow his counsel. But as a poor virgin, embrace the poor Christ.<sup>22</sup>

In fact, there seems to have been a correspondence between the concession of the Privilege of Poverty by Innocent III between 1215 and 1216, and Clare's acceptance of the title of abbess, in conformity to the Benedictine rule, which she had refused for a good three years. Her refusal goes beyond the *topos*, so frequent in monastic hagiography, of refusing three times to accept an office, usually the episcopate, and reveals that her conception of the religious life was very different from the Benedictine one.

But the insertion in the broad river bed of the Benedictine rule happened with the so-called Constitutions of Ugolino,<sup>23</sup> which were an attempt to give a structure and a single norm to the various female groups, among them San Damiano.

It would be an error to think that these Constitutions originated from an external and brutal will to channel or regimentalize spontaneous religious experiences. Rather, they arose from a serious effort to appreciate and interpret the strong and fervently contemplative character of these groups, a character which a man like Ugolino, endowed with sensitive religious feelings, was able to perceive.

With the Constitutions, Ugolino aimed at a profound renewal of the religious life in a radical and rigorous return to the deepest monastic needs. First of these was the renewal of the "flight from the world," taken in its most literal sense, as an absolute separation, even physical, from the surrounding environment. This took the form of "reclusion," according to a tradition which had been revived in the last few centuries. The life of "reclusion" was

<sup>22</sup>"Si quis vero aliud tibi dixerit, aliud tibi suggesserit, quod perfectionem tuam impediat quod vocationi divinae contrarium videatur, etsi debeas venerari, noli tamen eius consilium imitari, sed pauperem Christum, virgo paupere, amplectare," in Boccali, *Concordantiae, II Epistula Clarae ad Agnetem*, 17-18 [Armstrong, pp. 41-42].

<sup>23</sup>BF I, 394-399 [Armstrong, pp. 89-100].

led for the most part by solitaries, but was sometimes also associated with a stress on the seeking of mystical experience.

This type of religious life involves something that is not coincidentally also present in the Constitutions of Ugolino—a constant striving toward asceticism exercised in vigils, times of silence, and fasting, according to rigidly prescribed and established rhythms and procedures.

Ugolino's choice of this new emphasis certainly had a structural origin, and was the fruit of an analysis of the ecclesial-religious situation of his time. It was one of the poles of Ugolino's ecclesiastical policy, above all when he rose to the papal throne, but it also arose from his need for a bond with the most profound roots of his spiritual quest. It is in this line that we can understand his letters to Clare<sup>24</sup>—the “mother of his salvation,” as Ugolino calls her—and the sisters of San Damiano, which are worthy of being inserted in the literary genre of letters of monastic friendship, and his visits to San Damiano (recalled in one of the most beautiful epistles).<sup>25</sup> It also helps us understand Ugolino's very intense relationship with some of the monasteries which accepted his rule, like San Paolo of Spoleto, where, as Gregory IX, he would stop in May 1228 during the course of his struggle with Frederick II. This celebrated visit was recalled with wonder and admiration by Thomas of Celano in his *First Life*.<sup>26</sup> And yet there is still a clear and certain hiatus between the fervid monastic project of Cardinal Ugolino and the search for other forms of expression in spirituality and models of religious life. This was felt by at least some of these female groups, at times very acutely, as in the case of Clare and her companions at San Damiano.

The difference between the language used by Ugolino and that used by the *sorores minores* is revealed very clearly, for instance, by Gregory IX's letter of May 11, 1238, to Agnes of Bohemia,<sup>27</sup> in which, going again through the stages of the itinerary of the women of San Damiano, he took as the fundamental element the concession on his part, and the acceptance on theirs, of the Constitutions, the solid food that he opposes to the “milk” of the *formula vitae* of Francis. But the Poor Ladies of San Damiano always felt that Francis's words were the hinge of their *forma paupertatis*, to which they aspired with their whole being.

<sup>24</sup>K. Esser, “Die Briefe Gregors IX. an die hl. Klara von Assisi,” in *FS* 35 (1953), pp. 274–295.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 277 [Armstrong, pp. 101–102]. The letter is the *Ab illa hora*, written presumably after Easter of 1220. It is here too that we find the expression “*mater salutis suae*,” in reference to Clare.

<sup>26</sup>*Vita prima*, pars III, no. 122; [Omnibus, pp. 336–37].

<sup>27</sup>BF, I, 243.

Perhaps no theme illustrates the radical difference in their spiritual language as does that of enclosure. Although it is very difficult to trace Clare's original project without distortion, it is possible to discover its spirit and vibration in her writings. For Clare, there was no problem in prescribing a separation from the world, a separation which came from the depths of her heart and which she used to seek silence and recollection in order to make contemplation more intense and without shadows. The lines that Francis had traced out for the behavior of the brothers in the hermitage—as Lainati has wisely pointed out<sup>28</sup>—and the way of life that Francis pursued for the Portiuncula, which he wanted to be the center and model for all the Minors, offer sufficient light for a retired life of the contemplative type. Francis constantly felt attracted to this life, and felt it necessary to turn to it at the most difficult and most decisive moments of his religious search and at the turning points for the order. For her rule, Clare had the indications that Francis suggested for his brothers in the hermitage as to the division of time into periods of silence and prayer, which also imitated the rhythms proper to monastic life (on these points, it would be difficult to distinguish Clare's dependency on Francis from her dependency on Ugolino—or on a common tradition on which both drew). In addition to these there is the significant, and unambiguous, function of the serving sisters (*servientes extra monasterium*), probably modeled on that of the brother-mothers of the *Rule For Hermitages*.<sup>29</sup>

In the *Rule of Clare* the serving sisters are now clearly distinct from the other sisters, although not subordinate to them. But during the first period, didn't they also probably alternate in their functions and roles, in the same way as did the sons and mothers in the *Rule for Hermitages*, the sons absorbed in intense and constant prayer and their mothers watching over them, so that they would not be disturbed and distracted in their recollection? For Clare the term "servants" certainly must have been dearer to her than *moniales*, and they must have recalled to her the dignity of *minoritas*. But they were placed at the very heart of the group, and from some gestures of particular attention, like the washing of their feet reported by the various witnesses in the *Canonization Process*,<sup>30</sup> we can grasp Clare's attitude toward them: she considered them sisters in the full sense of the word. Another of Clare's actions was also

<sup>28</sup>C. A. Lainati, Introduzione a "Scritti e fonti biografiche di S. Chiara d'Assisi," Sect. IV of *Fonti Francescane*, II, Assisi, 1977, p. 2227.

<sup>29</sup>"Regula pro eremitoriis data," in Esser, *Opuscula*, 296-298; *Francis & Clare: The Complete Works* (NY: Paulist Press, 1982) pp. 146-148.

<sup>30</sup>Lazzeri, "Il processo," test. II, 9; X, 6 [Armstrong, pp. 148, 169].

significant: at a period and in a religious ambience in which the habit was charged with symbolism, served as a mark of a state of life, and was one with the position of the one who wore it, she provided the same habit for all in her rule; Innocent IV had provided quite differently in the rule of 1247.

Innocent IV himself considered the serving sisters deeply bound to the Franciscan reality of the Sisters of San Damiano. He provides for them in that rule of 1247<sup>31</sup> which we have already mentioned and which we will discuss in greater detail. However, they are absent—and not by chance—in the rule of Ugolino, who does speak of *servientes*, but does not mention any leaving of the *claustrum*.<sup>32</sup> The presence of the serving sisters cannot be considered only functional and organizational; rather it is profoundly one with the conception of the life of the *sorores minores* and of the *forma paupertatis* which they pursued, as revealed by the well-known words which Clare spoke to the serving sisters when they went out. According to the testimony of Suor Angeluccia de messer Angeleio da Spoleto, she admonished 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,”<sup>33</sup> words where the communion with creation and with the human surroundings is captured in all its intensity and, we might say, “dispersed” in the world, in a way that is characteristic of Minorite spirituality. And beyond these structural elements which were present in the life of the group of San Damiano, there was a way of feeling and living the “flight from the world” that was very different from the “cloistered” way of Cardinal Ugolino. This can be grasped from the concordant testimony given by Sister Cecilia Cacciaguerra and Sister Balvina da Coccorano, who relate that when Clare learned, in January 1220, that “certain brothers had been martyred in Morocco, she said she wanted to go there.”<sup>34</sup>

These are testimonies that all too clearly speak of a tension, in Clare as well as in Francis, between the apostolic-missionary and the contemplative vocations. But Clare never felt the need to create for herself and her companions screens to divide them from the world as rigid as those provided by the constitutions.

<sup>31</sup> BF, I, 476-483, particularly 482.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 394-399, particularly 396.

<sup>33</sup> “...che quando vedessero li arbori belli fioriti et fronduti laudassero Idio; et similmente quando vedessero li homini et le altre creature, sempre de tutte e in tucte le cose laudassero Idio.” *Process* XIV, 9, in Lazzeri, “Il processo,” [Armstrong, p. 179].

<sup>34</sup> *Process* VI, 6, see also VI, 2, in Lazzeri, “Il processo,” [Armstrong, p. 159].

For Cardinal Ugolino, however, enclosure became the keystone of a severely ascetic regulation with a rigidly monastic character, founded on "certain rules and requirements, and certain disciplinary laws," as the Prologue of the Rule<sup>35</sup> states. These rules would permit a well-regulated life and thus make possible a profound religious renewal.

Although Clare knew how foreign the constitutions were to what she and her sisters were seeking, she accepted them, as she accepted the Benedictine Rule, but she took from the *forma paupertatis* the essential nucleus of the evangelical life. This was the point that could not be renounced, the crucible where the ultimate fidelity to her own vocation and to Francis would be tested, the way of perfection on which it was not possible to accept the teaching or advice of anyone (as Francis himself had admonished in his last will for the Sisters of San Damiano).

Poverty is a very significant sign of the incarnation of Christ, which Clare, in the footsteps of Francis, and with a particularly vibrant feeling, sees in the "Lord of heaven and earth, lying in a manger;"<sup>36</sup> it is a virtue, united *in radice* with the "holy humility" and the "ineffable charity," by which Christ wished "to suffer on the wood of the cross and to die the most shameful kind of death."<sup>37</sup> It was on this point, then, that Clare concentrated her efforts and her struggle: it was in the *Privilege of Poverty*, already conceded and written by Innocent III in his own hand, that she recognized herself and found the roots of the *minoritas* which put her in communion with Francis and made her his "little plant."

She obtained, then, from Gregory IX, at the beginning of his pontificate the confirmation of the Privilege, and her first companions had a very lively awareness of how dear Clare held it. When they speak of it in the *Process of Canonization*, they vibrate like those who touch the incandescent and revealing essence of a life. For Beatrice, one of her sisters in the flesh, the sanctity of her mother and sister was revealed indeed in her virginity, humility, and constancy in prayer, in her disregard of herself, "in the fervor of her love of God, her desire for martyrdom," but "most especially in her love of the *Privilege of*

<sup>35</sup>"Certae regulae et mensurae, certae legis disciplinae," BF I, 395; [Armstrong, p. 90].

<sup>36</sup>"Rex angelorum, Dominus caeli et terrae in praeseptio reclinatur," in *Boccali, Concordantiae*, IV Epistola S. Clarae ad Agnetem, 21 [Armstrong, p. 51].

<sup>37</sup>"In hoc autem speculo refulget beata paupertas, sancta humilitas et ineffabilis caritas, sicut per totum speculum poteris cum Dei gratia contemplari" *ibid.*, (18). "In fine vero eiusdem seculi contemplare ineffabilem caritatem, qua pati voluit in crucis stipite et in eodem mortis genere turpiori": *ibid.*, 23 [Armstrong, p. 51].

*Poverty*.<sup>38</sup> Sister Filippa, the third witness, recalls that Clare honored the privilege of poverty "with great reverence and kept [it] well and with great diligence," stressing that "she feared she might lose it."<sup>39</sup> A fear that was certainly not unfounded, as witnessed by the constant pressure and urging that Clare accept property for herself and for her companions, as reported by some of the women of San Damiano in the Canonization Process and also by her *Legend*, which also relates the proposal of Gregory IX to release Clare from her vow, and at the same time, her courageous answer: that she did not want in any way in eternity to be dispensed from following Christ.<sup>40</sup>

Gregory IX's diffident attitude toward the desire of Clare and her companions for profound poverty was rooted in a solidly-established tradition in the Church and monastic life, which sees in poverty a condition that exposes one to worldly concerns and which is therefore not very favorable to those who want to devote themselves to a serious spiritual life. As the Pontiff wrote in 1232 to the nuns of Santa Maria delle Povere Recluse in Milan, in endowing them with the possessions of the hospital of San Biagio of Monza, he was concerned that "with iniquity abounding and charity cooling, too much need for many things" might force them to turn back, "which must not happen".<sup>41</sup>

And it is a deeply-felt concern that makes him attentive and patient in devising systems to provide for the support of these women who did not want possessions. And so in 1233, when a Siennese citizen offered the monastery of poor enclosed nuns of Santa Petronilla of Siena their own possessions, which they did not want to receive, Gregory IX entrusted the goods to the consuls of merchants of the city, so that the profits might devolve to them "for their use...faithfully."<sup>42</sup>

It is difficult to trace distinct phases and periods in the history of San Damiano—the periodic changes all seem, if anything, to have been imposed from the outside, from those who wanted to give a shape and a norm to the life of the *sorores minores*. Still, Clare's spiritual tension became more acute in a more and more conscious development of several points which constituted the heart of the Gospel as it echoed within her, and through the voice of Francis.

<sup>38</sup>Lazzeri, "Il processo," Test. XII, 6; [Armstrong, p. 174].

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., test. III, 14 [Armstrong, p. 149].

<sup>40</sup>*Legenda sanctae Clarae virginis*, ed. F. Pennacchi, Assisi, 1910, num. 14; [Armstrong, p. 269].

<sup>41</sup>"Abundante iniquitate et refrigesciente caritate multorum necessitas nimia...quod absit," L. Wadding, *Annales Minorum*, ann. 1221-1237, (ad Claras Aquas, 1931), vol. II, p. 681.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 687.

One of the focal points, it seemed to her, was the free spiritual relationship with the companions of Francis, who had to have access to San Damiano to bring that bread that she and her companions needed. Clare's resistance was born from an ever-deeper awareness of the limits imposed on the spiritual growth of her group by the Ugolinian constitutions and by the rigid interpretation given to the vigilance to be observed in the relationship between the brothers and sisters, especially the reading given by Gregory IX in his *Quo elongati* to chapter 11 of the *Regula bullata*, which related to this point.<sup>43</sup> The very firm position of Clare and her companions, who were ready to undertake what today we would call a "hunger strike" tells us very clearly how strongly Clare felt the need for a simple, free spiritual exchange and relationship with the Friars Minor.

Even though the experience at San Damiano had been deeply marked by the Ugolinian constitutions which had conditioned from the inside the ways and rhythms of life, which had assumed, at least in part, a clearly monastic character, Clare began to feel an intense and profound need—from what we are given to understand, beginning in the 1230's—to give her sisters a rule of their own, which would demonstrate the Minorite and Franciscan soul of the group.

This tension is illustrated most emphatically by Clare's beautiful letters to Agnes of Bohemia, which express, in a very exalted tone, a mysticism born from the development of monastic spirituality and its encounter with the fervent Minorite root. These letters also testify to the birth and development of an increasingly intense spiritual friendship between these two women, with Clare at first as the "mother" of Agnes, who had more recently begun to travel on the spiritual road, then as "mother and daughter" (in the fourth letter, it seems, of 1253).<sup>44</sup> And so in this relationship, each of the two women feels she is the daughter and the mother in her encounter with the other.

Roggen cautiously suggests in a short, intelligent and very lively little book,<sup>45</sup> that it was Clare who pushed Agnes to request, for herself and the group which had formed around her in Prague, a dispensation from the Ugolinian constitutions and the chance to base herself on the *formula vitae* of

<sup>43</sup>H. Grundmann, "Die bulle 'Quo elongati' Papst Gregors IX," already edited in *AFH* 54 (1961), pp. 3-25, now in Grundmann, *Ausgewählte Aufsätze, I: Religiöse Bewegungen*, in *Schriften der Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, Band 25/1 (Stuttgart, 1976), pp. 222-42. The edition of the bull is on pp. 230-42; the passage in question is on pp. 241-42.

<sup>44</sup>Boccali, *Concordantiae*, IV Epistula, 4; [Armstrong, p. 49].

<sup>45</sup>H. Roggen, *Lo spirito di S. Chiara*, (Milan, 1970).

Francis, an attempt to obtain on the periphery, we might say, something which could then be extended to the whole movement. Even if this was not the case, we can certainly say that it was the same heart and the spiritual search which they both matured together that impelled Agnes to formulate such a specific request.

But it was just when Innocent IV, on reaching the papal throne, seemed to realize, by the bull *Cum Omnis* of August 1247,<sup>46</sup> the Franciscan root of the San Damiano movement, which could not be fitted into the Benedictine mold, that Clare understood that she could no longer accept a rule formulated from the outside and in substance foreign to the spirit which animated her experience and that of her companions.

To Clare it seemed that the Rule of Innocent IV was attentive to some aspects of Franciscan life that were more marginal to her (such as a certain kind of relation to the outside world permitted to the serving sisters, a more intense bond with the Friars Minor to whom they were united by the common recitation of the Divine Office according to the Franciscan custom and the spiritual care of the nuns entrusted to them). But she also felt that this rule betrayed the very heart of minority, that is, the refusal to have possessions, poverty lived in all its fullness. Clare's last years were marked, then, by the writing of the Rule, and we have a testimony to how much importance she attached to its acceptance by the Church from Sister Filippa, who says that Clare wanted "one day to place her lips upon the papal seal [of the bull of approval] and then, on the following day, to die."<sup>47</sup>

It is important to remember that this Rule came at the end of a whole difficult religious experience which had not always been left free to develop on its own. Therefore the Rule reflects the different voices and traditions which weighed on the religious life of the Poor Ladies of San Damiano. Yet for Clare, it represented the explicit, I would say objective, confession of her desire for a total community of life between the Friars Minor and the Sisters of San Damiano. And certainly the Franciscan filiation is very clearly evident: the *Regula bullata* constitutes the supporting base of Clare's Rule, which however, had to draw for everything concerning the common life, not only from the Benedictine Rule, but also from the rules of Ugolino and Innocent IV. But Clare's voice rises, fully, freely and clearly in that chapter (no. VI in the present division), which is inserted, and not by chance, at the center, as the

<sup>46</sup>BF I, 476-83.

<sup>47</sup>Lazzeri, "Il processo," test. III, 32 [Armstrong, p. 153].

hinge and pivotal point of the whole Rule. Love of and fidelity to "most holy poverty" are not indicated there as an abstract norm. Rather, they are considered the guiding thread of a whole spiritual journey, the heart of the sisters' vocation, revealed to them by God, and illuminated by the word of Francis, and therefore an inviolable and essential commitment of their being and their choice.

In this chapter, one notices the very exalted tone of the pages of Francis's Testament (which Clare undoubtedly had before her). Both Francis and Clare, on reaching the culmination, the end of their lives, in the light of a suffering that strips to the bone and lays bare the essentials, go over its fundamental points once again. They indicate the flame that animates them, and their last illuminations; they try to communicate the highest point of understanding they have reached. Even the language and "literary genre" set this chapter apart from the rest of the text and allow us to glimpse a free, spiritual temperament narrow-mindedly shut up in exterior regulations, although capable, in some of the specific details formulated there, of a concrete translation of ideals into life. But for illuminating the rule from within and gaining a deeper understanding of the life of the first sisters and the spirit that animated them, nothing is as valuable as that splendid document, Clare's *Canonization Process*.

The totally Franciscan character of Clare's government emerges from the testimonies of her companions: she was a spiritual mother and "servant" to her sisters, as the Rule prescribed. Her companions recall the tender solicitude she showed even in the acts of everyday life which revealed her concrete and sensitive love, and her personal attention to each one of them. But more than any other quality, they stress her compassion. In the Rule, Clare would see consolation of the afflicted as one of the abbesses' specific tasks, so that, as she wrote, "the sickness of despair may not prevail in the heart of the afflicted one."<sup>48</sup> Testimony to the strength of this norm comes from Sister Agnes de Messer Oportulo, who tells to us that when Clare saw "any of the sisters suffering some temptation or trial" she called her "secretly" to her and "consoled her with tears and sometimes threw herself at her feet."<sup>49</sup> The

<sup>48</sup>Boccali, *Concordantiae*, *Clarae Regula*, IV, 11-12: "Consoletur afflictas. Sit etiam ultimum refugium tribulatis, ne, si apud eam remedia defuerint sanitatum, desperationis morbus prevaleat in infirmis"; [Armstrong, p. 69].

<sup>49</sup>Lazzeri, "Il processo," test. X, 5 [Armstrong, p. 168].

*Process* also tells us the source from which the spiritual life of these women was nourished. Listening to Scripture, especially through preaching, was certainly one of the cornerstones. Again sister Agnes de Messer Oportulo testifies to us that "Lady Clare delighted in hearing the word of God,"<sup>50</sup> and this is a trait that the author of the *Legend of St. Clare* takes up and develops.<sup>51</sup> And we learn what importance Clare attached to this from the harsh conflict, as we have already mentioned, which she had with Gregory IX on this very matter. And this is an interesting fact, since we can perceive here at its birth that need to nurture in a serious way a whole spirituality which would lead to the formation of a religious literature in the vernacular, precisely within the feminine mendicant orders. And in addition, it makes us aware of how not only the laity, but also the monasteries, at least of these new orders, felt an ever-stronger need to become more closely acquainted with Scripture, particularly the Gospel, and essentially entrusted to the preacher the task of mediation.

Another great spiritual school for Clare and her sisters was the liturgy, for it too, was founded on the Word. Their prayer life, from what is revealed by the testimonies of the companions, was centered essentially on the heartfelt and loving participation in the principal events of the life of Christ, and particularly the Passion.<sup>52</sup> The Word, the liturgy and prayer constituted, therefore, the most living sources from which these women drew the Christian mystery, which Clare also wanted signified by acts that were very simple, but evocative of profound realities, like the distribution of holy water to the sisters after Compline, in memory of the water that came from the crucified side of Christ, memorialized in the chant of aspersion during the Easter season.<sup>53</sup>

And perhaps this is the thing most characteristic of Clare and her companions, the life-blood which runs throughout their lives, and makes these women not Benedictines, but Franciscans; this significance of every thing, this expressing in gestures and words that were measured yet full and essential, the

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., text. X, 8 [Armstrong, p. 169].

<sup>51</sup>*Legenda*, cap. 37; [Armstrong, p. 289-90].

<sup>52</sup>Lazzeri, test. X, 3; X, 10; XI, 2; [Armstrong, pp. 168, 170, 171].

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., test. XIV, 8; [Armstrong, p. 178].

mystery of life which they felt in their lives. Thus Clare's gestures: the sign of the Cross, which she loved to make repeatedly on humble and everyday objects,<sup>54</sup> her washing the feet of the serving sisters,<sup>55</sup> which she certainly carried out in the spirit of that passage of the Gospel of John (John 23), dear also to Francis, the way she woke the sisters by calling them in the night "with certain signs, to praise God"<sup>56</sup>—all speak of a spiritual striving which was present not only at "religious" moments, but was implicit in every act of living, and gave it flavor and meaning.

The acceptance of the Rule by Innocent IV marked at once the end of Clare's life and the end of all the suffering which had led the little group of San Damiano, through obedience and resistance, to form themselves into a specifically Franciscan Order, founded on a rigorous faithfulness to poverty.

But what about those women who wandered barefoot throughout northern Italy and through a still broader area which extended as far as Spain, France and Germany, girded with the cord and habit of San Damiano—called *discalceatae*, *chordulariae* or even *minoretæ*,—against whom Gregory IX in 1241, Innocent IV in 1250 and Alexander IV in 1257 and 1261<sup>57</sup> asked the ecclesiastical authorities to intervene in harsher and harsher tones? Did they not express the soul of the female Franciscan movement, which did not have an opportunity to assert itself and to live in the Church of the thirteenth century?

It is a question that cannot fail to be raised if we keep in mind that in 1298 Boniface VIII imposed on all female monasteries the sternest obligation to strict enclosure. The whole female religious movement, whatever its spirit and

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., test. I, 16-18; III, 6 and *passim* [Armstrong, pp. 140-41, 147]; *Legenda*, chapters 32-35 [Armstrong, pp. 285-88]. In the *Fioretti*, the image of Clare is bound up with her blessing of bread in the presence of Pope Gregory IX during his visit to San Damiano and the miracle of the sign of the cross that remained impressed in the loaves of bread ("I Fioretti di S. Francesco," [Ch. 33] in *Fonti Francescane*, I, no. 1867; [Omnibus, p. 1380-82]). There rose around Clare the memory of Eucharistic miracles, like this one recalled by the *Fioretti* or the miracle of multiplication of loaves of bread recalled in the canonization process (Lazzeri, "Il processo," test. VI, 16; [Armstrong, p. 161]). The memory of these miracles is an expression of the awareness in the surrounding area of Clare's very intense devotion to the Eucharist. I wonder if this element should not serve to enrich and make more complex the discussion of Clare's priestly behavior and especially of the reading in this key given by the witnesses, in addition to the episode connected with the attack of the "Saracens" on San Damiano, in which Clare is said to have carried the Holy Sacrament—or to have had it carried—before her (Lazzeri "Il processo," test. IX, 2 [Armstrong, p. 165] and *passim*).

<sup>55</sup>See note 30.

<sup>56</sup>Lazzeri, "Il processo," test. II, 9; [Armstrong, p. 143].

<sup>57</sup>BF I, 290; *ibid.*, 541-42; *ibid.*, II, 183-84; *ibid.*, 417.

whatever it sought, was forced to express itself through the grill and in the enclosure of the cloister.

Here too, the Poor Clares were the order on which the papacy based its hopes for a renewal in women's monasticism.<sup>58</sup> The papacy felt that this renewal could only arise from a clear and reaffirmed radicalness of life, but could only conceive of this life for women taking place in contemplation, protected and safeguarded from contact with the surrounding environment.

This is a perspective that I believe should be kept in mind, although the struggle of Clare and her companions can only be measured against their faith in deepest poverty, understood as a condition of a life grasped in its bare essentials and at the same time as an attitude of creatureliness and total dependence on the Father. Clare and her companions were not only the most rigorous and fervid interpreters of the heart of the message of Francis; they also reaffirmed in all its radicalness in the Church and society of the thirteenth century the revolutionary and fiercely-debated value of poverty.

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<sup>58</sup>See in this regard, among others, R. Brentano, *Due chiese: Italia e Inghilterra nel XIII secolo* (Bologna, 1972), pp. 270-71 and *passim*.