Image and Vision: Contemplation as Visual Perception in Clare of Assisi's Epistolary Writings

Timothy Johnson, O.F.M. Conv. Collectanea Franciscana 64 (1994): 195-213

In her study entitled Image as Insight, Margaret Miles notes that the later Middle Ages evidenced a linkage between the use of visible religious imagery, devotional literature, and mental visualization in contemplation. The use of religious imagery in worship, sanctioned ultimately by the incarnation of Christ in the material world, mediated the richness of the spiritual world to the faithful and often evoked an affective response from them in contemplative prayer. During the Middle Ages, many people entered into contemplation when they began to look upon the visible depictions of various events in salvation history portrayed in the myriad of statues and paintings which adorned their churches. The decidedly visual dimension of contemplation was encouraged and reinforced by medieval devotional literature which exhorted men and women, by means of creative imagination, to visualize in prayer the same people and events represented in the religious art of the day.

Given the medieval predilection toward the use of visual imagery in the praxis of contemplative prayer, it is not surprising that Clare of Assisi employs several terms associated with visual perception when she treats the subject of contemplation in her *Letters to Agnes of Prague*.² Writing from the cloistered

¹Margaret Miles, Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985) 63-75 and 150-152. See also: Elizabeth Vavra, "Bildmotiv und Frauenmystik—Funktion and Rezeption" in Frauenmystik im Mittelalter, ed. Peter Dinzelbacher and Dieter R. Bauer (Ostfildern bei Stuttgart: Schwabenverlag, 1985) 201-230, esp. 221-227; Karma Lochrie, Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991) 28-34; and Elizabeth Petroff, Medieval Women's Visionary Literature (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) 5.

²This study will not make use of the Letter to Ermetrude of Bruges. The authorship of this letter, which has been attributed to Clare, is questionable at best. According to Jean-François Godet, this text should not be considered among the writings of Clare; see: Claire d'Assise, Écrits. intro. and trans. Marie-France Becker, Jean-François Godet, and Thaddee Matura (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1985) 19. All references to the Latin text of Clare's letters are from this work which will be referred to as: Écrits. The English translations, unless otherwise noted, are from: Clare of Assisi:

environs of San Damiano, where Francis of Assisi was converted as he contemplated a painted cross depicting the Crucified Christ, Clare urges Agnes to direct her gaze towards the Crucified Lord who has become her Bridegroom. Clare speaks of this dynamic practice of imaging or visualizing Christ as contemplation.³ This paper will examine, first of all, Clare's approach to contemplation by studying the visual vocabulary she utilizes and some of the Christological images that her words evoke. This paper will then indicate how Clare's use of the visual mode of perception in contemplation is fitting, not only because of the medieval link between prayer and art which has already been mentioned, but also because of Clare's particular spirituality and the relative facility of visual language to convey the immediacy and intimacy of the contemplative encounter with Christ.

Visual Vocabulary

Clare's frequent use of the word *contemplatio* (contemplation) in her letters to Agnes brings Clare's approach to prayer immediately within the realm of imagery and vision. Etymologically speaking, contemplation connotes an experience marked by visual perception. In one form or another the word appears seven times in Clare's letters to Agnes:

contemplatio	4LAg 11	cuius affectus afficit, cuius contemplatio reficit, [Whose affection excites, Whose contemplation refreshes,]
contemplationem	3LAg 13	transforma te ipsam totam per contemplationem in imagine divinitatis ipsius,[transform your entire being into the image of the Godhead Itself through contemplation.]
contemplatione	4LAg 33	In hac contemplatione posita, habeas memoriam pauperculae matris tuae,[In this contemplation, may you remember your poor little mother,]
contemplare	2LAg 20	regina praenobilis, intuere, considera, contemplare, desiderans imitari. [O most noble Queen, gaze

Early Documents. ed. and trans. Regis Armstrong (New York: Paulist Press, 1988; revised, St. Bonaventure, Franciscan Institute Publications, 1994). This work will be referred to as: Documents. On the question of medieval epistolary literature and women writers; see: Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre. ed. Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993).

³After an extended reflection on Christ as mirror, Clare writes, "In hac contemplatione posita, habeas memoriam pauperculae matris tuae..." 4LAg 33, Écrits, 116.

⁴The idea of contemplation as visual perception appears throughout the biblical, patristic and medieval tradition, see: Jean Leclercq, Études sur le vocabulaire monastique du moyen age (Romae: Herder, 1961) 85-87.

		upon [Him], consider [Him], contemplate [Him], as you desire to imitate [Him].]
contemplare	4LAg 23	In fine vero eiusdem speculi contemplare ineffabilem caritatem,[Then, in the depth of this same mirror, contemplate the ineffable charity]
contemplans	4LAg 28	Contemplans insuper indicibiles eius delicias, [As you further contemplate His ineffable delights,]
contemplari	4LAg18	sicut per totum speculum poteris cum Dei gratia contemplari. [with the grace of God, you can contemplate them throughout the entire mirror.]

The word *speculum* (mirror) is another term from Clare's vocabulary which suggests that prayer is linked to imagery and visual perception. She employs the metaphor of the mirror nine times as she describes how Agnes should come before Christ in prayer:

4LAg 14	candor lucis aeternae et speculum sine macula. [the brilliance of eternal light and the mirror without blemish.]
4LAg 15	Hoc speculum quotidie intuere, o regina, sponsa Jesu Christi,[Gaze upon that mirror each day, O Queen and Spouse of Jesus Christ,]
4LAg 18	sicut per totum speculum poteris cum Dei gratia contemplari. [with the grace of God, you can contemplate them throughout the entire mirror.]
4LAg 24	Unde ipsum speculum, in ligno crucis positum, [Therefore, that Mirror, suspended on the wood of the Cross,]
4LAg 19	Attende, inquam, principium huius speculi paupertatem positi siquidem in praesepio[Look at the border of this mirror, that is, the poverty of Him who was placed in a manger]
4LAg 22	In medio autem speculi considera humilitatem, [Then, at the surface of the mirror, consider the holy humility,]
4LAg 23	In fine vero eiusdem speculi contemplare ineffabilem caritatem, [Then, in the depth of this same mirror, contemplate the ineffable charity]
3LAg 12	pone mentem tuam in speculo aeternitatis, [Place your mind before the mirror of eternity!]
4LAg 18	In hoc autem speculo refulget beata paupertas, [Indeed, blessed povertyare reflected in that mirror,]
	4LAg 15 4LAg 18 4LAg 24 4LAg 19 4LAg 22 4LAg 23 3LAg 12

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), *vide* (see), *speculare* (study), *candor* (brilliance), and *refulget* (reflect) which appear throughout her letters to Agnes. These words confirm the visual nature of the contemplative experience:

T. Johnson

intuere	2LAg 20	regina praenobilis, intuere,[O most noble Queen, gaze upon [Him],]
intuere	4LAg 15	Hoc speculum quotidie intuere, o regina, sponsa Jesu Christi, [Gaze upon that mirror each day, O Queen and Spouse of Jesus Christ,]
lucis	4LAg 14	candor lucis aeternae et speculum sine macula. [the brilliance of eternal light and the mirror without blemish.]
speculare	4LAg 15	et in eo faciem tuam iugiter speculare [and continually study your face with it,]
considera	2LAg 20	regina praenobilis, intuere, considera, [O most noble Queen, gaze upon [Him], consider [Him],]
considera	4LAg 22	In medio autem speculi considera bumilitatem, [Then, at the surface of the mirror, consider the holy humility,]
consideranda	4LAg 24	Unde ipsum speculum, in ligno crucis positum, bic consideranda transeuntes monebat dicens:[Therefore, that Mirror, suspended on the wood of the Cross, urged those who passed by to consider,]
refulget	4LAg 18	In boc autem speculo refulget beata paupertas,[Indeed, blessed povertyare reflected in that mirror, .]
candor	4LAg 14	candor lucis aeternae et speculum sine macula. [the brilliance of eternal light and the mirror without blemish.]
attende	4LAg 19	Attende, inquam, principium buius speculi paupertatem positi siquidem in praesepio [Look at the border of this mirror, that is, the poverty of Him who was placed in a manger]
attendite	4LAg 25	O vos omnes qui transitis per viam, attendite et videte si est dolor sicut dolor meus; [All you pass by the way, look and see if there is any suffering like my suffering!]
vide	2LAg 19	Vide contemptibilem pro te factum et sequere, [Look upon Him Who became contemptible for you, and follow Him,]
videte	4LAg 25	O vos omnes qui transitis per viam, attendite et videte si est dolor sicut dolor meus, [All you pass by the way, look and see if there is any suffering like my suffering!]

All these words appear in the context of a contemplative encounter with Christ. Every one of them refers to an exercise of the imagination whereby Agnes is encouraged to visualize Christ as Spouse or Mirror. By using the visual terminology that she does, Clare distinguishes her approach to contemplation from that of Francis of Assisi. Although his literary corpus is far more extensive than Clare's, Francis never uses words like speculum or speculare and

only once does he employ terms similar to contemplatio or intuere.5 Francis's visual vocabulary is far less refined than Clare's and is focused often on the Eucharist.⁶ Francis's particular use of visual language may reflect his strong devotion to the Eucharistic Christ and the importance in medieval culture of seeing the sacramental bread at the time of the consecration.7 Although her sisters claimed Clare had a strong devotion to the Eucharist, she neither speaks of gazing upon, nor of visualizing the Eucharistic Christ in her letters to Agnes.8 The lack of visual language in reference to the Eucharist may be due to the fact that the Poor Ladies evidently rarely, if ever, saw the celebration of the Eucharist since their choir was separated from the chapel by a covered grill.9 Because of this situation, Agnes of Prague requested permission from Gregory IX to see the Eucharist celebrated five times a year. 10 The absence of any reference to the Eucharist in Clare's letters to Agnes may be explained also by the apparent infrequent reception of the sacrament among the Poor Ladies. According to Clare, they were to receive the Eucharist seven times a year.11

⁵For Francis's use of *contemplatio* and *intuere*; see: Kajetan Esser, Adm 1: 20, *Die Opuscula des bl.*Franziskus von Assisi (Grottaferrata: Ad Claras Aquas, 1989): 107. This work will be referred to as:

Opuscula.

⁶For examples of Francis's visual vocabulary and Eucharistic devotion, see: Adm 1, Opuscula, 106-107; EpCler I: 3, Opuscula, 163; EpCler II: 3, Opuscula, 164; and EpOrd: 28, Opuscula, 261. For a detailed listing of Clare's and Francis's vocabulary, see: Jean-François Godet and George Mailleux, Opuscula sancti Francisci Scripta sanctae Clarae, Vol. 5 of Corpus des sources franciscaines (Louvain: CETEDOC, 1976).

⁷Concerning Francis's eucharistic devotion, see: B. Cornet, "Le 'De Reverentia Corporis Domini,' Exhortation et Lettre de S. François," Études Franciscaines 6 (1955): 65-91, 167-180; 7 (1956): 20-35, 155-171; 8 (1957): 33-58. On the practice of "visual communion" and the medieval understanding of Eucharist, see: Miri Rubin, Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture (Cambridge: The University of Cambridge Press, 1991) 63-64, 150-151, and 155-163.

⁸For the testimonies of the sisters, see: Proc II: 11, *Documents*, 144 and Proc IX:10, *Documents*, 167. In Clare's canonization process, Sister Francesca (Proc IX:10) stated that on one occasion when Clare received communion, the host Francesca saw resembled a small, beautiful young boy. On visions of a child in the host, see: Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 117, 135-138, 143, and 344.

⁹RegCl 5:10-15, Écrits, 140. On this point and the Rule of Hugolino and The Rule of Pope Innocent IV; see: Documents, 68, n. c; RegHug 11, Documents, 96-97; and RegInn 7, Documents, 120-121. On the question of architecture, Eucharist, and the Poor Ladies; see: Caroline Bruzelius, "Hearing is Believing: Clarissan Architecture, ca. 1213-1340," Gesta: The International Center of Medieval Art, 31/2 (1992): 83-91.

¹⁰On Agnes' devotional life in the cloister and the question of the Eucharist; see: Jaroslav Polc, Agnes von Boehmen 1211-1282: Koenigstochter-Aehtissin-Heilige. (München: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1989) 84-90. See also: Alfonso Marini, Agnese di Boemia (Roma: Istituto Storico dei Cappuccini, 1991): 103-105.

¹¹ RegCl 3:14, Écrits, 132.

Regardless of the nature and intensity of Clare's Eucharistic devotion, her visual vocabulary indicates that her contemplative praxis includes a decided Christological dimension. This Christological aspect of contemplation is confirmed in those texts where Clare develops the images of Christ as Spouse and Mirror.

Christ as Spouse

From the opening of her first letter to Agnes, Clare stresses Agnes' royal lineage and her spousal relationship with Christ. Clare calls to mind the dignity of Agnes' former state in life and her new vocation by mentioning Agnes' decision to reject Frederick II's offer of marriage. Although Agnes chose to live a life of poverty by entering the Order of Poor Ladies, she has not left the ranks of nobility. She has chosen, instead, a richer and more noble life because her decision to enter religious life is rooted in her spousal union with the noble Christ. She has taken, as Clare points out, "...a spouse of a more noble lineage,...." The power, generosity, appearance, love, and courtesy of Agnes' divine spouse far exceed anything that an earthly, albeit royal, spouse could offer her. By her option for the Order of Poor Ladies, Agnes has chosen the embrace of her new spouse, the Lord Jesus Christ. His love makes Agnes chaste, his touch leaves her pure, and his union with her preserves her virginity.

Agnes' royal stature, evident in her natural lineage as well as spiritual marriage, is confirmed in Clare's second, third, and fourth letter. For example, Clare addresses Agnes in the third letter with the following words, "To the lady [who is] most respected in Christ and the sister loved more than all [other] human beings, Agnes, sister of the illustrious king of Bohemia, but now the sister and spouse of the Most High King of heaven." Agnes' marriage to such a royal spouse assures her that she remains among the ranks of royalty. In fact, the choice to forego the splendors of an imperial wedding for the sake of Christ frees Agnes to enter into a divine union with the King of Kings in the heavenly bridal chamber. Following in the tradition of Bernard of Clairvaux, Clare appeals to the Song of Songs to remind Agnes of the ecstatic pleasures that await her as she contemplates her spouse:

¹²¹LAg 1-9, Écrits, 82-84.

¹³¹LAg 7, Documents, 38 (Écrits, 84).

¹⁴3LAg 1, Documents, 44 (Écrits, 100). See also: 1LAg 1, Écrits, 82; 2LAg1, Écrits, 92; and 4LAg1, Écrits, 110.

¹⁵²LAg 1-7, Écrits, 92.

As you further contemplate His 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 embrace me happily, [and] You will kiss me with the happiest kiss of Your mouth. 16

Agnes' spouse is like no other spouse. He is the most royal and noble of grooms, a spouse whose beauty far surpasses all others. Paradoxically, he is also the poorest of the poor, the lowest and most despicable of all men. Agnes has chosen as a spouse the poor, Crucified Christ, whom others rejected, despised, scourged and killed. The has united her life to a spouse who calls her to follow in his footsteps by putting aside all earthly possessions. To follow in his footsteps is to embrace and imitate the Crucified Christ. While this decision entails an attempt to live a life modeled on Christ, this it also calls for an on-going contemplative encounter with the one who is to be imitated. Thus, Clare urges Agnes to place herself daily in the presence of Christ by the use of her imagination. In her spousal poverty, Agnes embraces her poor spouse by visualizing him in prayer:

But as a poor virgin, embrace the poor Christ. Look upon Him Who became contemptible for you, and follow Him, making yourself contemptible in this world for Him.

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.

O most noble Queen, gaze upon [Him], consider [Him], contemplate [Him], as you desire to imitate [Him].

¹⁶⁴LAg 28-32, Documents, 51-52 (Écrits, 116) On the use of the Song of Songs and bridal imagery, see: E. Ann Matter, The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania; 1990) 123-150. On the theme of "spiritual marriage," see: Leo Scheffczyk, "Brautsymbolik" in Vol. 2 of Lexikon des Mittelahters (Munich: Artemis Verlag, 1983): 589-591 and Pierre Adnès, "Mariage Spirituel," in: Vol. 10 of Dictionnaire de Spiritualité (Paris: Beauchesne, 1980): 388-408. The Dictionnaire de Spiritualité will be referred to as: Dictionnaire.

¹⁷ ILAg 12-30, Écrits, 86, 88, 90 and 2LAg 7-20, Écrits, 92, 94, 96.

¹⁸On the importance of models in medieval spirituality, see: Caroline Walker Bynum, Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) 95-106. On various feminine models in Clare's writings; see: Regis J. Armstrong, "Starting Points' Images of Women in the Letters of Clare" Greyfriars Review 7 (1993): 347-380.

¹⁹⁴LAg 15, Écrits, 114.

If you suffer with Him, you will reign with Him. [If you] weep [with Him], you will 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 men. 20

The text above indicates that Clare's suggested form of contemplation emphasizes the importance of embracing, abiding with, and even dying with the beloved. As the bride of Christ, Agnes finds herself already held in his arms. Her choice to live in poverty assures her of this intimacy because those who, like Christ, choose poverty free themselves for his embrace alone. The invitation to gaze, consider, and contemplate the poor Christ flows from Agnes' choice to respond to the divine embrace by clinging to Christ with all her heart. As she urges Agnes to visualize her spouse, Clare reminds her to, "...embrace the poor Christ." This expression of contemplation, accompanied by the desire to imitate Christ, fosters the ecstatic enjoyment of his embrace and the remembrance of the reward held in heaven for all who remain faithful to their calling by abiding with and clinging to Christ in his death and resurrection.

Christ as Mirror

Clare's desire for Agnes to dwell in the presence of her beloved spouse by means of contemplative prayer is furthered by the use of the mirror as an image of Christ. ²⁵ Clare introduces the mirror imagery in her third letter and develops it further in the fourth letter. Clare's use of the mirror as a visual metaphor is certainly not unique per se. Medieval writers, especially in the twelfth century, reveal a continual fascination with mirror imagery. ²⁶ At times

²⁰2LAg 18-22, Documents, 42 (Écrits; 96 and 98).

²¹1LAg 10, Écrits, 84.

²²¹LAg 12-30, Écrits, 86, 88, 90.

²³2LAg 18, Documents, 42 (Écrits, 96).

²⁴⁴LAg 30-32, Écrits, 116.

²⁵On the use of the mirror metaphor in medieval literature, see: Margot Schmidt, "Miroir" in: Vol. 10 of Dictionnaire, 1290-1303. She notes (1301)that the mirror metaphor is used: as an analogy; as a principle of imitation, and as a means for moral conversion through knowledge of self. All three of these uses are found in Clare's writings; see: 3LAg 12, Écrits, 102; 4LAg 14-26, Écrits, 112 and 114; and TestCl 19-21, Écrits, 170. On the idea of mirror imagery in Clare's spirituality; see: Regis J. Armstrong, "Clare of Assisi: The Mirror Mystic," The Cord 35 (1985): 195-202 and Karen Karper, "The Mirror Image in Clare of Assisi," Review for Religious 51 (1992): 424-431.

²⁶Colin Morris, The Discovery of the Individual 1050-1200 (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1991) 116-120. On the question of the twelfth century and the "discovery" of the

they employ the image of the mirror as a way of bringing the individual reader to a greater understanding of self. Drawing on the Greek myth of Narcissus, medieval love poetry, for example, speaks of the experience of love and how the lover is mirrored in the eyes of the beloved. Through the attempt to love another, the lover discovers a greater knowledge of self. This quest of the self toward individuation through love plays a role in medieval Christian literature as well. The Christian comes to a deeper knowledge of self by gazing into the mirror of Christ because he is the beloved in whose reflection the Christian discovers his or her true spiritual nature.

In both secular and religious medieval literature there is an intrinsic link between mirror imagery, the experience of love, and relationships with others. Given Agnes' relationship with Christ as the beloved spouse, it is not surprising that Clare makes use of the mirror in her development of the dynamics of visual contemplation. She considers Christ to be a mirror in which Agnes is to consider her countenance everyday:

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, covered as is becoming the daughter and most chaste bride of the Most High King, with the flowers and garments of all the virtues.²⁷

According to Clare, Christ is the beloved who gave himself completely to Agnes. She is called to love him completely in return. Unlike blind lovers who have been ensnared by the world, Agnes has chosen to express her love by renouncing anyone and anything that would hinder her passion for her most beautiful and noble, yet poor and humble spouse. When Agnes looks upon the one she loves in contemplation, she is to consider him to be a mirror which reveals the divine image. Clare urges Agnes to place herself before the mirror of Christ, "Whose beauty the sun and moon admire, Whose rewards and their preciousness and greatness are without end." If Agnes gives herself over to such contemplation, she will encounter Christ, the mirror of eternity, and she will know the depths of divine love:

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

individual, see also: Bynum, Jesus as Mother, 82-109.

²⁷4LAg 15-17, Documents, 50 (Écrits, 114).

²⁸³LAg 1-17, Écrits, 100, 102, 104.

²⁹3LAg 16, Documents, 46 (Écrits, 104).

entire being *into the image* of the divinity itself through contemplation. So that you too may feel what His friends feel as they taste the *bidden sweetness* that God Himself has reserved for those who love Him.³⁰

When Clare asks Agnes to place herself before the mirror of eternity, she is inviting her to offer her entire being to Christ. This reading of the text cited above is confirmed by Clare's use of the phrases "Place your mind...," "Place your soul...," and "Place your heart ..." in her invitation to Agnes. The words "soul" and "heart," along with "mind," are used interchangeably by medieval writers to convey the essence or spiritual center of the human person. Agnes' prayerful offering of her entire self is her way of responding with love to the love Christ has shown for her in his total gift of himself. Reflecting the Franciscan conviction that love transforms, Clare writes that the love Agnes encounters in contemplation has the power to transform her into the image of her beloved. By placing herself before the mirror of eternity, that is to say, the Mirror of Christ, Agnes is fashioned into an image of the one whom she beholds with her eyes. Contemplation thus leads to transformation.

When Agnes visualizes him in contemplation, Christ becomes a mirror which also reflects back to her a true image of the woman she is called to be as his spouse. ³³ As she studies her face in this divine mirror, Agnes recognizes that the virtues of humility, poverty, and charity reflected in the life of Christ are to become her own as she follows in his footsteps. Clare believes, therefore, that mirror imagery fosters a growth in self-knowledge. She invites Agnes to look into the mirror of Christ in order to perceive who she is in the present moment and who she is called to be throughout eternity. Agnes should discern in the reflection of the mirror that she is the spouse of the Crucified Christ, whose poverty already enriches her. This Crucified Bridegroom is also a heavenly Spouse and King, the mirror without blemish in which shines the

³⁰3LAg 12-14, *Documents*, 45 (Écrits, 102). The English translation of this text has been altered somewhat. *Documents* translates the phrase, "in imagine divinitatis ipsius (3LAg 13)" as "into the image of the Godhead Itself." The use of the word "Godhead" gives an even greater apophatic sense to the text than that already present in the Latin.

³¹Medieval writers often use the concepts of heart(cor) mind(mens) and soul(anima) interchangeably to convey the biblical idea of the essence or spiritual center of a person; see: Jean Châtillon, "Cor et cordis affectus" in: Vol 2 of Dictionnaire, 2289-2300.

³²Bonaventure's teaching on love, which follows the Pseudo-Dionysian tradition, speaks of the transforming nature of love; see: 1 Sent, d. 15, dub. 5 (I, 275b) and 14 Dom post Pent (IX, 407b-408b). Bonaventure teaches that love transforms because it unites; see: Robert Prentice, The Psychology of Love (St. Bonaventure, N. Y.: The Franciscan Institute, 1951) 54-58.

³³⁴LAg 15-24, Écrits, 114.

splendor of eternal glory. The vision of Christ, already partially perceptible in the mirror, is to be the ultimate blessing in the heavenly Jerusalem.³⁴

Unlike some medieval writers, Clare's use of the mirror in the development of self-knowledge does not neglect or ignore the image of the beloved in whose reflection the lover comes to a greater awareness of self.³⁵ When Clare invites Agnes to visualize Christ as a mirror and to gaze into that mirror, the focus of attention is primarily on Christ. She is to glance at herself, but her eyes are to focus and linger on Christ:

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! 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. 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. ³⁶

Visual Language and Contemplation

Clare's description of contemplation in her letters to Agnes of Prague clearly underlines the significance of visual language in the understanding and praxis of prayer. This appeal to visual language is due, no doubt to a great degree, to the medieval linkage of artistic imagery, devotional texts, and the use of the imagination in contemplative prayer. The significance and concomitant power of religious imagery to move the imagination and foster contemplation is evident throughout medieval culture; however, the ability of images to encourage prayer is not the only motive behind Clare's choice to describe contemplation in visual terminology. The reason also lies within her own spirituality and in the nature of visual language in religious discourse.

Clare's spirituality is situated firmly within what is known as the kataphatic tradition.³⁷ The word *kataphatic* stems from the Greek *kataphemi* (to assent, to

³⁴On individuation of self and the changing use of Jerusalem imagery, see: Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual*, 148-152.

³⁵Morris notes that many twelfth century writers appear to be more interested in the multi-faceted experience of love for its own sake than in the person they loved; see: Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual*, 118-119.

³⁶⁴LAg 19-23, Documents, 50-51 (Écrits, 114).

³⁷On the kataphatic and the apophatic traditions, see: David Granfield, Heightened Consciousness: The Mystical Difference (New York: Paulist Press, 1991) 56-84; Philip Sheldrake, Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992) 191-198 and Bernard McGinn, The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century. Vol. 1 in

say yes). The kataphatic approach to God maintains the conviction that there is a discernible similarity between creatures and the Creator. Consequently, it is possible to know and assent to divine realities because creatures are analogically related to the Creator. By means of the created forms, icons, images, and symbols, those who enter into prayer can come to a deeper 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. The kataphatic tradition stands in a dialectical relationship with what is referred to as the apophatic way. The term apophatic comes from the Greek apophemi (to refuse, to say no). The apophatic tradition holds that there is a radical dissimilarity between creatures and Creator. As a result, apophatic contemplative prayer necessitates the on-going liberation from analogical images of the divine based on created realities.

While there is little evidence of the apophatic tradition in Clare's understanding and practice of contemplative prayer, there is much in her letters to Agnes which speaks of the kataphatic tradition. The kataphatic tradition appeals analogically to interpersonal relationships and human sense knowledge to communicate the radical, immanent presence of God revealed in prayer.38 As the texts used in this study indicate, Clare expresses the intimacy of the 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 tasting, sweetness, feeling, embracing, kissing, speaking, fragrant perfumes, gazing, and seeing. This use of sensual 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 en-

counter with the divine in kataphatic contemplation.

Given Clare's decidedly kataphatic spirituality, it is not by chance that she turns frequently to visual language in her description of contemplative prayer. Recent research in the area of religious symbolism and perception indicates that writers appeal to visual language in religious discourse, as opposed to aural language, because it is more apt to convey the sense of immanency proper to the kataphatic contemplative experience. In his study entitled Word and Light: Seeing, Hearing, and Religious Discourse, David Chidester begins by

The Presence of God. A History of Western Christian Mysticism (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991) 173-177.

³⁸ Harvey Egan, What Are They Saying About Mysticism? (New York: Paulist Press, 1982) 46.

noting that all human awareness is mediated through sensory perception, and that two privileged sensory modes of perception are hearing and seeing.³⁹ In his analysis of vision as perception, Chidester outlines the Greek understanding of vision as popularized by Plato. Plato's theory of vision revolves around the organ of sight as opposed to the object of sight. The eye radiates intraocular fire in the form of visual rays that touch the objects of perception rendering the external reflections of the objects available to the eyes. This act of sight take place in the context of an external source of light, such as the sun, which serves to merge the three elements of sight, visual rays, reflections, and external source of light, into a unified, continual process know as vision. As a result of this dynamic, the process of visual perception is associated with concepts like continuity, connection, immanency, presence, and union.

Chidester notes that the Greek and subsequent Christian understanding of aural perception is quite different than visual perception. As opposed to the act of seeing which is an activity initiated by the organ of sight, aural perception is a passive action initiated by an external object. The sound perceived by the ear is the result of an activity by an agent external to the hearer. In the process of auditory perception, the external agent "strikes the air," so to speak, and "shatters the airwaves." These broken waves of air, then striking the hearing organ, result in the perception of sound. The passage of the air waves does not occur instantaneously as does the passage of light. This temporal nature of hearing distinguishes it from vision. Another distinguishing feature is the spatial aspect of auditory perception. In the act of hearing, the object of perception is not necessarily immediately present to the subject. As Chidester points out, there is no immediate, on-going connection or union between the one who hears and that which is heard. He concludes, therefore, that whereas visual perception affords a continuous, immediate relationship between agent and object, auditory perception reveals the fundamental, discontinuous nature of the relationship between agent and object.

If visual perception is rooted in a relationship of continuity, immediacy, and union between the subject and agent of sight, then it is understandable that Clare turns to visual language when she speaks of the contemplative experience. Other religious writers also make use of visual language precisely for this reason. Chidester points out how writers like Philo, Augustine, and Bonaven-

³⁹David Chidester, Word and Light: Seeing, Hearing, and Religious Discourse (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 1-8.

ture all employ visual language when speaking of contemplation. ⁴⁰ Clare's own extensive and refined visual vocabulary serves to convey the immanent presence of the Christ in the contemplative experience. Her preference for visual language underlines her conviction that Christ will be continually and intimately present to Agnes if she envisions him daily as Spouse and Mirror. Clare's emphasis on the visual mode of perception also confirms the unitive dimension of the spousal experience with Christ as Bridegroom.

Clare's use of visual vocabulary does not mean that she excludes the other senses from contemplation. On the contrary, her kataphatic approach to God includes the other senses. Clare favors, however, vision among all the senses operative in contemplation. In a previously quoted text, she uses the visual mode of perception as the entry way to a profound mystical encounter with Christ involving taste as well as sight:

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 divinity itself through contemplation. So that you too may feel what His friends feel as they taste the hidden sweetness that God Himself has reserved for those who love Him. 41

At first glance, this text is strikingly contradictory. Clare urges Agnes to look upon Christ, the mirror of eternity, so that she may feel what his friends feel as they taste the divine sweetness. She does not invite Agnes to look so that she may see or eat, but so she may taste. The sense perceptions of seeing and tasting are described as if they were one and the same.

The unity of sense perception in Clare's description of the contemplative experience is an example of synesthesia. Synesthesia stems from the Greek syn (together) and aisthanesthia (to perceive); it occurs when one sense stimulates another sense, resulting in heightened perception. This intersensual stimulation and perception is apparent, for example, when someone associates taste with touch when they speak of a "sweet embrace." As a literary device, Chidester thinks that the synesthetic experience has three dimensions. First, synesthesia is antistructural; it is indicative of a perceptual paradox. How is it possible for someone to taste an embrace? The claim to taste an embrace is

⁴⁰On the positions of Philo, Augustine, and Bonaventure; see: Chidester, Word and Light, 38-39; 65-66; and 120 respectively.

⁴¹³LAg 12-14, Documents, 45 (Écrits, 102).

⁴²Diane Ackerman, A Natural History of the Senses (New York: Random House, 1990) 289-290

⁴³ Chidester, Word and Light, 17-19.

tenable because it is the concrete experience of individuals; yet, the description of the experience itself contradicts the normal structure of sense perception. An embrace is felt not tasted. When synesthesia occurs, the normal structural boundaries of the senses are broken down, the different senses are blended, and the perceptual experience is intensified and rendered more compelling and immediate. Second, synesthesia points to transcendence by passing beyond the normal expectations associated with the senses. If the senses can be blended in a crossover of different modes of perception, there is the possibility that they can also be transcended. Third, synesthesia evidences a unity among the senses. When someone speaks of a "sweet embrace," the apparent contradiction between the structured senses of taste and touch is transformed into a single, unified, uniquely inclusive perceptual experience.

Mystics like Clare have recourse to synesthetic symbolism because such language conveys the antistructural intensity, transcendence, and unity of the mystical experience. The paradoxical nature of synesthetic symbolism affirms the reality of sense perception in a kataphatic mode by presupposing a common experience of the senses. It is useless, for example, to speak of a "sweet embrace" if there is no concomitant understanding of what is intended by tasting and touching. At the same time, synesthetic symbolism indicates that the usual structures of sense perception are rejected or denied in an apophatic mode as the senses perceive in a new and radically different mode. Clearly, to refer to an embrace as a "sweet embrace" is to deny what is meant by tasting and touching. The dialectical affirming and negating suggested by synesthetic symbolism points to a transcendent movement leading beyond the common structure of sense perception to a new, unitive perception of reality.

The dynamic of synesthesia, wherein sense perceptions are affirmed and denied dialectically in a compelling, transcending movement toward unity, mirrors the kataphatic and apophatic dynamic of the mystical encounter, wherein images of the divine are affirmed and denied in an intense, ascending movement toward union with God. Consequently, Clare turns to synesthetic language in her attempt in *The Third Letter to Agnes* to express, in writing, what in essence lies beyond linguistic expression. When she invites Agnes to gaze into the mirror of eternity so that Agnes may feel what the friends of God feel as they taste the divine sweetness, Clare is asking her to look upon the Christ with whom Agnes is united in a loving embrace. The love of Christ for

⁴⁴On synesthesia and mysticism; see: Chidister, *Word and Light*, 19-21; 84-85; 120; and 142. While Chidester discusses the appropriateness of synethesic language for mystics, he does not mention the kataphatic and apophatic aspects of synesthetic symbolism.

his spouse, which is experienced in contemplative prayer, is so powerful that it can transform Agnes into the very image of the beloved. Clare can only hint at the incredible intensity of this unitive, transforming experience by means of a synesthetic paradox where seeing and tasting are associated, blended, and united on a new level of contemplative perception.⁴⁵

Conclusion

As this study reveals, Clare of Assisi, whose very name, "Chiara," speaks of vision and light, considers contemplation as a form of visual perception focused on the poor, yet royal Christ. Her varied and refined visual vocabulary indicates the significant roles of imagery and sight in the contemplative encounter which this study defines as the kataphatic approach to God. Clare's recourse to visual language is the consequence of many elements such as the medieval view of artistic imagery as a visual matrix of prayer, the belief that literary images can move the imagination to contemplation, and the kataphatic nature of her spirituality which turns naturally to visual language in order to convey the intimacy, immediacy, and intensity of spousal union with Christ.

This study does not claim to exhaust all aspects of Clare's teaching on contemplation. A significant area of Clare's thought, which remains to be developed further, concerns the relationship between contemplative experience, language, and the significance of the human body in the process of knowing. If religious symbolic language is, according to Chidester⁴⁶, implicitly or explicitly grounded in sensory experience, then it is an embodied language drawn from the world of sensual perception proper to both men and women. However, if women somatize religious experience and use intense body metaphors in their writing more frequently than men, as Caroline Walker Bynum suggests⁴⁷then the role and nature of the senses, the body, feminine experience, and spousal union are all areas providing fertile ground for further investigation into Clare's approach to contemplation. For some reason, scholars studying the question of the body and feminine spirituality have tended to ignore Clare's own contribution to this fascinating area of the Western spiritual tradition.

⁴⁵Clare's biographer writes that Clare herself experienced the depth of union with Christ in such an intense manner that she is described as being "out of her senses." This incident of Clare in contemplation has strong visual overtones: see: LegCl 31, *Documents*, 284-285.

⁴⁶ Chidester, Word and Light, 22.

⁴⁷Caroline Walker Bynum, Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion (New York: Zone Books, 1991) 194.

Finally, another area of Clare's teaching which this paper does not examine concerns the possible importance of her thought for those who desire to develop their own form of contemplation. A reading of her letters to Agnes of Prague demonstrates that Clare's spirituality offers numerous insights into the content and dynamics of contemplative prayer. The use of the imagination, the experience of spousal relationship with Christ, the nexus between poverty and contemplation, the unitive power of desire, and literary friendship as a font of spiritual encouragement are some of the dimensions of her spirituality which could offer assistance to those wishing to deepen their own life of prayer.