

## Saint Clare of Assisi, A Beautiful Woman<sup>1</sup>

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Assisi. A cluster of well-protected houses on a hill. Also, a splendid rose-window, resembling a lace flower, embroidered by the hands of Comacine stonecutters of old medieval names: Maestro Beraldino de Bisonne and Maestro Dietaiuti de Nèrbisci, to name a few. It is the rose-window of the cathedral of San Rufino.

And when the bells of San Rufino rang a full peal, the sound would spread throughout Assisi, from the large bell-tower to the distant forests and plains. A deep, soft, powerful sound of genuine bronze.... And when they signalled a celebration or assembly in the Piazza of San Potente or when they summoned the magistrates and prominent persons of the town to gather at the church for consultation in matters of greatest importance, it was as if they placed the entire town under the protection of the patron saint and martyr, Rufinus. He appeared on the insignia of the Commune, the military carriage, and the church, dressed in red and adorned with jewels, which represented the rocks with which he was stoned to death.... As the ancient hymn composed by St. Peter Damian in honor of the martyr said, Let the multitude of the faithful sing of the great merit of Rufinus who conquered the world, and free, rose to the stars. Now, free from the burden of the flesh, he is clothed in red and wears around his head an aureola of precious stone....<sup>2</sup>

It is a feast day, Palm Sunday. Through this rose-window, symbol of the Mystic Rose, the brilliance of the Sun of the East which dawns from on high is brought down into the church, even as far as the altar linens, and frames the most beautiful and interesting group of persons in the crowded congregation.

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<sup>1</sup>This article, "Una Donna. Santa Chiara d'Assisi," first published in *Forma Sororum*, 3-4 (1991) 182-200, is from a conference delivered by the author at the "Incontri di spiritualità francescana," sponsored by the Tuscany Province of the Friars Minor. A Spanish version of the article, "Santa Clara de Asís, Mujer Bella," from which this article is translated, was published in *Selecciones de Franciscanismo*, 21 (1992) 367-380. The article retains the nature of an oral presentation.

<sup>2</sup>R. Bacchelli, *Non ti chiamerò più padre. Il romanzo di San Francesco*. (Ed. Jesus-Paoline: 1981), 371, 378. In the Italian, the hymn composed by St. Peter Damian is cited in Latin as follows: "Magnum Ruphini meritum—Canat turba fidelium—Qui mundo victor extitit—Et liber astra petiit... Nunc carnis liber onere—Rubro vestitus pondere—Corona plexus capite—De pretioso lapide."

(Aesthetics is not merely a philosophical category but also, according to Augustinian thought, the "Face of God.") It is a most beautiful, colorful, vain and pompous, yet at the same time, modest and well-behaved group of women belonging to the nobility of Assisi. Within this group, we see a *donna bella*.

She was a virgin, ...[and] because she had a beautiful face, a husband was considered for her," attests Lord Ranieri di Bernardo of Assisi, the eighteenth witness in the *Acts of the Process of Canonization*, and as someone later added, a "likely suitor (Proc XVIII 1-2).<sup>3</sup>

A *donna bella*, therefore. Yes, it is Palm Sunday, and the story is well-known. The glamour of that ray of sunlight entering through the rose-window rests upon a beautiful young woman who would become, as was foretold before her birth, "a light which will give light more clearly than light itself" (LegCl 2).<sup>4</sup> By that same ray of sunlight, she was baptized in the baptismal font of the said church of San Rufino, and she was christened *Clare* (though undoubtedly at home she would have been called "Clarita" or "Clarella," as many of her contemporaries called her). On this Palm Sunday, however, the ray of sunlight is broken by Bishop Guido who, adorned for the solemnity in the manner of St. Rufinus, descends without tarrying from the altar to the young woman, placing in her hands a palm branch.

That night is the flight from Assisi, when Clare leaves behind the walls of the city and begins her downhill journey in the cold, starry night. Her heart is calm again after having been excited only moments before when she forced her way through the door protected by a thousand defenses. (Proc XIII 1.) A little later, at the bottom of the hill, the terrain changes, becoming marshy and full of reed beds. (The past existence of these reed beds is reflected even today in the names of such towns as Cannara and Cannaiola. Still today, if you ask the older folk who descend Mount Subasio where they are going, they will tell you, "Down to the bog, the marsh!" The marsh is the Spoleto valley!)

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<sup>3</sup>All quotations from documents written by or concerning St. Clare are taken with permission from Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap., ed. and trans., *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents* (New York and Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1988). The reference to Ranieri as a 'likely suitor' comes from Proc. XVIII 2: "the witness himself had many times asked [Clare] to be willing to consent to [marriage]," *Early Documents*, 173.

<sup>4</sup>In almost all the codices studied by Pennacchi, the one which is recognized as being the only Latin edition of the *Legenda* (F. Pennacchi, *Legenda S. Clarae virginis*, Assisi: 1910) reads, "Ne paveas, mulier, quia quoddam lumen salva parturiet, quod ipsum lumen clarius illustrabit." Other manuscripts contain "mundum" in place of "lumen." Cf. B. Gugghetti, *Legenda versificata S. Clarae*, in *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 5 (1912) 245, n. 7, hereafter cited as *AFH*

Clare is by herself, but she is not alone. The sound of the wind which blows through the reeds accompanies her. She well knows the way, for she has traveled it many times before with her servant Bona in order to secretly meet with Francis and Filippo. Even now, despite the darkness, she is able to distinguish between the black oak, the maple, and the wild olive, and when she stops to catch her breath, she knows where to place her feet between the various plants. She also has time to listen to the poetry of the friends who accompany her in the night: the lapwings, jays and snipes who flap their wings at her speedy yet cautious passing over the soft ground and are stirred to sudden flight from the thicket.

Though her heart is in her throat, Clare recognizes the *beauty* of which all creation is speaking. Nothing is so beautiful as that sudden rising of birds in flight, and like the birds, she is now setting out for Christ without hesitation. "We were rescued like a bird from the fowlers' snare; broken was the snare, and we were freed!" (Ps 124:7).<sup>5</sup>

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In recent years, both before and after *Mulieris dignitatem*, a rich bibliography of St. Clare has appeared with the investigation of the feminine religious movement of the Middle Ages. The most recent exponent of Clare is the latest volume of the review *Laurentianum* (1-2, 1990) which studies from diverse perspectives, and in thought-provoking articles, the theme, "Clare: Feminine Franciscanism." The theme of our Week, "Clare and the Charism of Women," is different. Nonetheless, just as it is necessary for any written presentation of Clare to take into account the many studies of her life and works, so too will I consider such studies in this oral presentation. Thus, having as a point of departure, the basic bibliography drafted in 1953, the centennial of the death of Clare, let us set out toward the year 1993, the centennial of the birth of the "little plant" of Francis. Now I will allow my heart to express itself.

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#### Clare, A Beautiful Woman

One might wonder why I say *beautiful*. Actually, the theme of this conference comes to me spontaneously, seeing the entirety of subjects studied throughout this Week. In the course of this Week, we consider women from various facets, from "Women in the Gospel" and "Women and Virginitly in the

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<sup>5</sup>All biblical citations are taken from the *New American Bible* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 1987).

Fathers of the Church," to "The Feminine Dimension of the Writings of St. Francis," and the references to Mary in "The Reading of the Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary." Clare, as a woman, sums up in herself all that has been and is associated with the feminine, the "eternal woman." Hence I will strive to remain close to the theme which I have selected, as departing from it would cause me to repeat things which have been said or will be said in these days.

No other woman has been so "Woman," so "Madonna," to speak in medieval language, as Clare. No other woman possesses such a well-defined personal typology which is situated, so to speak, between the Franciscan mystical experience (from the betrothal with Lady Poverty to the blood of the Stigmata) and the *Canticle of Canticles*, a work never cited by St. Francis.

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#### Then, Why Beautiful?

I consider Clare beautiful for at least six reasons, though there could be tens of reasons.

1. To begin: Clare is beautiful because she is a *virgin* in the eyes of God.

I believe that Fr. Emmanuel Testa sheds light on this subject in his two important volumes concerning *Mary, Virgin Earth*,<sup>6</sup> published only a few years ago. In Book V, beginning on page 416, Testa considers Mary as the fourth element of the Tetrarch. He states, "Mary, in the dogma of the ancient church, was never considered as a woman of the earth, nor as a goddess, rather as "Virgin earth," and such is the case throughout the Universal Church, as much in the east as in the west. "Virgin earth," who constitutes the fourth element of the divine Tetrarch, cannot be formed by the flesh of the incarnate Word, as she is governed by the Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity...."

This same "Virgin earth," element of the Tetrarch, which is the Church, the Bride who, adorned, descends from heaven in the Apocalypse, is also the humble virgin Clare. (Francis, how did you, a man of the Middle Ages and hardly learned, come to understand so well the mystery of the woman of the desert so as to express it in this parable?)<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>E. Testa, *Maria terra vergine* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1984).

<sup>7</sup>Cf. 2Cel 16; LM, III 10; L3S, 50; from Marion A. Habig, ed., *Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), hereafter cited as *Omnibus*. Cf. also A. Clareno, *Cronaca delle sette tribolazioni* I 5, from *Fonti Franciscane* (1977), 2139, hereafter cited as *FF*.

St. Basil of Seleucia asserts, "Once God took clay and formed the human person; now he has taken clay from the Virgin (that is to say, her flesh), molded it with his skill, and it has become man."<sup>8</sup>

Adriana Valerio, in the last issue of *Laurentianum*, taking a citation from K. Borresen ("Imago Dei. Privilège masculin?..." ) is of the opinion that the expression, "Imago Dei invenitur in viro...non...in muliere,"<sup>9</sup> is harsh. Valerio comments, "Women, by nature, are considered inferior and are excluded from the privilege of the divine image."<sup>10</sup> It appears to me that the aforementioned citation of St. Basil, as well as the volumes of Emmanuel Testa, and all the Judeo-Christian theology of the early sources, refute such a statement. In reality, the original copy was broken ("O felix culpa!"), and thus God re-formed his human project, this time "taking clay from the virgin," the "virgin earth," re-creating the new man in Christ. This does not seem to me to be a degradation of women, but on the contrary, a very strong estimation of the value of *consecrated virginity*, that is to say, that which remains "in perpetual custody," in the heart of the Trinity, as "clay" for the continual re-creation of the "new man."

For this reason, in the first place, Clare is beautiful: she is the "clay" with which God re-creates the new man; she is a virgin in the eyes of the One-Triune God.

The *Legend of St. Clare* details her strategy: "Feigning that she would marry a mortal at a later date, she entrusted her virginity to the Lord" (LegCl 4). Clare's choice as a woman is to remain a virgin. According to the *Process of Canonization*, all the witnesses happen to praise and testify to her virginity (Proc III 2, VII 2, XIII 1, XVI 2) which she treasured even before having met Francis—a precious observation which I owe to Cettina Militello.<sup>11</sup> Francis comes "afterward." Someone, that Someone (with a capital "S") to whom the "virgin earth" belongs, preceded the herald of the Great King and his counsels!

2. Clare is beautiful because she is, as Francis calls her, the *Spouse of the Holy Spirit*.<sup>12</sup> Clare is covered, as is Mary, by the Shekinah of the Father and is

<sup>8</sup>*Or.*, 39, 4; *Patrologie Grècque*, 85, 437.

<sup>9</sup>For reference to this work, cf. A. Valerio, *La questione femminile al tempo di Chiara*, in *Laurentianum* 31 (1990) 52, n. 6., hereafter cited as *Laur*.

<sup>10</sup>*Laur* 52.

<sup>11</sup>C. Militello, *Chiara e il "femminile"*, in *Laur*. 31 (1990) 96.

<sup>12</sup>"Spiritui Sancto vos desponsastis," writes Francis in his *Form of Life* for St. Clare and her sisters, when they began their life at San Damiano (in 1212, or in the beginning of 1213, according to K.



made fecund by the Spirit, the Giver of life. This is the secret of the eternal youth of Clare (as it is of Mary). Not in vain did James of Sarug, a Syrian bishop of the fourth and fifth centuries, write, "The creatures condemned to the process of aging were rejuvenated by means of Mary."<sup>13</sup>

Clare is wedded as a young girl, as was Mary, in front of the altar of the Virgin in the Portiuncula, where the Virgin Mary becomes for Francis the "Church."<sup>14</sup> It is there that, as the *Legend* states, "by the hands of the brothers,"<sup>15</sup> and not at the hands of Francis as is customarily asserted, that her locks fell, though not to the ground. This spouse of the Holy Spirit belongs to the whole Franciscan family, and the spousal language which she uses continually brings us to a sign of belonging, not of privation.

Allow me to point out that the name Mary (Maryàm or Miryàm), according to the best bibliography,<sup>16</sup> is a name very possibly composed of two roots, one Egyptian and the other Hebrew. The first root, *Myr*, in Egyptian, means "the loved one," and *yam* (or *ya*), is a Hebrew word related to the Name of

Esser, *Die Opuscula des hl. Franziskus von Assisi* (1976), 298). For the English, cf. *Form of Life*, 1, Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M.Cap. and Ignatius C. Brady, O.F.M., *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works* (New York, Ramsey, Toronto: Paulist Press, 1982), 44-45, hereafter cited as *Complete Works*. This text is reproduced by St. Clare in her *Rule*, VI 3. Cf. G. Boccali, *Opuscula S. Francisci et S. Clarae* (S. Maria degli Angeli-Assisi: 1976), 75, 174, hereafter cited as *Opuscula*. For the English, cf. *Rule VI 3, Early Documents*, 69. This expression, in its totality, is repeated in the Antiphon of the *Office of the Passion*: "Sancta Maria virgo...filia et ancilla altissimi regis Patris caelestis, mater sanctissimi Domini nostri Iesu Christi, sponsa Spiritui Sancti." For the English, cf. *Office of the Passion, Complete Works*, 82. This reveals the Mary-Clare parallel, *Domina sancta-Dominæ pauperes*, a parallel which is alive in the heart of Francis and, subsequently, in the entire Franciscan tradition.

<sup>13</sup>C. Vona, *Omèlie mariologiche di Giacomo di Sarug* (Rome: 1953), 145-146.

<sup>14</sup>Hilarius Pyfferoen, O.F.M.Cap., *Ave...Dei Genetrix Maria, Quae es Virgo Ecclesia Facta (S. Francisci)* in *Laur.* 12 (1971) 412-434; and Hilarius A. Wingene, O.F.M.Cap., *S. Franciscus et S. Maria de Angelis ad Portiunculam* in *Laur.* 10 (1969) 329-352, concerning the relation of Mary-Virgin-made-church and the Portiuncula, where the Salutation *Hail Holy Lady* would have been born with a clear reference to the Portiuncula as "Mary-made-church," and as such, the place most-loved by St. Francis.

<sup>15</sup>"Ibi manu fratrum crines deponens," *LegCl* 8, FF, 3170. For the English, cf. *LegCl* 8, *Early Documents*, 196. Cf. also Luigi Padovese, O.F.M.Cap., *La "tonsura" di Chiara: gesto di consacrazione o segno di penitenza?* in *Laur.* 10 (1969) 400. For the English, cf. L. Padovese, *Clare's Tonsure: Act of Consecration or Sign of Penance?* in *Greyfriars Review* 6 (1991) 77, hereafter cited as *Clare's Tonsure*. According to Padovese, "the failure to mention Francis is significant and most likely is due to Celano's rereading of the episode" (*Clare's Tonsure*, 77). It is another way of saying that which we assert: that this Spouse of the Holy Spirit now belongs to the whole Franciscan family, to the point that one can omit the name of the founder in a gesture so loaded with significance.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. E. Vogt, *O nome de Maria à luz de recentes decobertas arqueológicas* in *Revista eclesiastica Brasileira* I (1941) 473-481; M. J. Lagrange, *Evangile selon Saint Luc* (Paris: 1918), 27-28; J. J. Stamm, *Hebräische Frauennamen* in *Festschrift Baumgartner* (Leiden: 1967), 301-339.

Yahweh. Hence, Mary or Myriam means "the loved one of God." In regard to the Egyptian root *Myr*, it is also interesting to note that the first person known by the name Mary is the sister of Moses.

Clare therefore is a beautiful woman, for she, as another Mary, is the *loved one of God*.

So much has been spoken of Clare as *another Mary* (especially on the part of all the female companions of Clare, as can be seen in the *Legend*) and as Spouse of the Holy Spirit that I will not detain myself on this title. Only a short time ago, Fr. Optatus van Asseldonk dedicated to the subject at hand numerous articles in his two volumes, *La lettera e lo Spirito*,<sup>17</sup> and a complete volume, *María, Francesco, Chiara*<sup>18</sup> published only last year. At the same time, Marco Bartoli has also studied this subject in his book *Chiara d'Assisi*, in the chapter titled "The Theology of Clare."<sup>19</sup>

Here I wish to pause and reflect on the title Spouse with Marianne Schlosser who has dedicated to this theme a meticulous article in the already cited volume of *Laurentianum*.<sup>20</sup> In the article, Schlosser offers many insightful observations. For example, in her *Letters*, Clare refers to Agnes of Prague as "mother" twice, and "sister" three times, while no less than seven times does she call her "spouse of Christ." Moreover, for Clare, the Office of Saint Agnes, virgin and martyr, has much importance: "Ipsi sum desponsata cui angeli deserviunt, cuius pulchritudinem sol et luna mirantur." ("I am newly wed with Him whom angels serve, whose beauty the sun and moon admire.") The Office of Saint Agnes is freely cited by Clare as much in the first as in the third and fourth *Letters*. This Office was incorporated into the Roman-Germanic Pontifical halfway through the tenth century as a part of the "rite of the reception of the veil" or the "consecration of the virgins," used also by Clare, as can be observed in her *Rule* (RCL X 19).<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Optatus van Asseldonk, O.F.M.Cap., *La lettera e lo Spirito* (Rome: 1985). Cf. in vol. II: *Maria Santissima e lo Spirito Santo in San Francesco d'Assisi*, 93-123; *Maria, sposa dello Spirito Santo, secondo San Francesco d'Assisi*, 125-135; *Madre*, 197-205. Concerning Clare as "spouse of the Holy Spirit," cf. also Optatus van Asseldonk, O.F.M.Cap., *The Holy Spirit in the Writings and Life of St. Clare in Greyfriars Review*, 1 (1987) 93-104.

<sup>18</sup>O. van Asseldonk, O.F.M.Cap., *Una spiritualità per domani. Maria, Francesco e Chiara* (Rome: 1989).

<sup>19</sup>M. Bartoli, *Chiara d'Assisi* (Rome: 1989), 167-170.

<sup>20</sup>M. Schlosser, *Mutter, Schwester, Braut: Zur Spiritualität der hl. Klara* in *Laur*. 31 (1990) 176-197. For the English, cf. M. Schlosser, *Mother, Sister, Bride: The Spirituality of St. Clare* in *Greyfriars Review* 5 (1991) 233-249.

<sup>21</sup>*The Rule of St. Clare* alludes to this ceremony of the "consecration of virgins" in chapter XI: "pro aliqua sororum in monialem consecranda," *Opuscula*, 180.

Furthermore, if the sign of espousal is *communion* with the spouse, the beautiful result is the insistence on the *cum/with*: "If you suffer with Him, you will reign with Him." The expression, "with Him," is repeated various times in the *Second Letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague* (2LAg),<sup>22</sup> emphasizing her union and the joy of her union with her Spouse.

It is a theme which will appear again in the end.

3. Clare is beautiful for being a *mother, sister, and servant*.

Clare is a *Mother*, as is the Church. She is capable of giving birth to the Son of God in the world, and many sons and daughters in God. In the *Process of Canonization* of Clare, John of Ventura, who conversed in the house of Clare, affirms, "Then she went to the place of San Damiano, where she became mother and teacher of the Order of San Damiano, and she begot there many sons and daughters in the Lord Jesus Christ, as is seen today" (Proc XX 7). Moreover, has it not been said that a woman "will be saved through her motherhood, provided [she] persevere in faith and love and holiness with self-control" (1 Tim 2:15)?

For Clare, the model of living in community is Francis, to whom the brothers turned, calling him "dearest mother." Both the *Rule* and the *Testament* are hymns to motherhood, which is, in essence, mercy. Being a mother means holding others in one's arms, in the manner of the *rahamin* of God—in their fragility and weakness, in their sickness and even despair—always blessing them with the sign of the cross.

One episode in the veritably difficult fraternal life of San Damiano is well-known. It is the story of Sister Andrea who could no longer bear the scrofula which she suffered in her throat. Perhaps it was through desperation, or perhaps because of thoughtlessness as the *Process* seems to suggest, that:

one night while Sister Andrea was below in the dormitory, she squeezed her throat with her own hands so strongly she lost her voice. The holy mother [Clare] knew this through inspiration. Then she immediately called the witness [Sister Filippa who recounts this story], who slept near her and told her: Go down immediately to the dormitory because Sister Andrea is seriously ill; boil an egg and give it to her to swallow. After she has recovered her speech, bring her to me (Proc III 16).

With such sweetness, with such conviction, and with the intuition of a mother, Clare acts, even before she knows what happened!

<sup>22</sup>"Cui (Sponso tuo prae filiis hominum specioso) si compateris, condoles congaudebis, in cruce tribulationis commoriens cum ipso in sanctorum splendoribus mansiones aethereas possidebis" *Opuscula*, 205.



Clare is beautiful as a *Sister*. We could cite many passages in reference to the sentence of Francis: "For if a mother loves and nourishes her child according to the flesh, should not a sister love and nourish her sister according to the Spirit even more lovingly? (RCl VIII 16). I will not linger on this point, for two extensive and careful studies by Cettina Militello and Marianne Schlosser in the recent volume of *Laurentianum*<sup>23</sup> treat the subject at length.

Almost totally unknown, for it is not found in the *Sources* of any language, is a charitable and certainly authentic act found in a codex of 1912 by Benvenuto Bughetti.<sup>24</sup> In the story, an infirm sister makes a pretentious and almost insolent request for bread from the town of Nocera and trout from the Topino River. In reply, an Invisible Someone deposits there all that is in want. This is but one example of the delicate motherhood-sisterhood of Clare knowing how to procure its needs from the omnipotence of Him who holds in His hands all the rivers of the universe and the fragrance of all bread.

Concerning *service*, Fr. Anton Rotzetter offers many insights in his recent study "The Theology of Service as Feminine Submissiveness and/or Maturity."<sup>25</sup> Some of his points are arguable, but they are nonetheless valid in deepening our understanding of a category so Franciscan as that of service. "Whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant" (Mt 20:26) is the root of minority for Clare. Minority is not standing back with crossed arms, but rather being always ready to serve: sometimes cleaning the infirmary or washing the feet of the sisters who come from outside work, and at other times attending to many things at once, or spinning and furnishing corporals for churches.

The fact is that "the *self-perception of Clare* is handed down to us above all by the expression unworthy servant of Christ, which appears not one time, but each time that Clare, so to speak, defines herself."<sup>26</sup> Clare is the unworthy servant of Him who "did not come to be served but to serve." "Ecce ancilla Domini." ("Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.")

There also exists as a further observation of a humble and beautiful woman, traditionally marked by the perfume of flowers, that single spot in the corner of the refectory of San Damiano. "Not the most eminent place as corresponds

<sup>23</sup>Militello, 62-105; Schlosser, 176-197. For the English, Schlosser, 233-249.

<sup>24</sup>B. Bughetti, *Miraculum S. Clarae ad huc viventis in eius Legenda praetermissum*, in *AFH* 5 (1912) 383-384.

<sup>25</sup>A. Rotzetter, *Die Theologie des Dienstes als Unterordnung und/oder frauliche Reife. Ein Beitrag zur Biographie und Spiritualität der heiligen Klara*, in *Laur.* 31 (1990) 342-388.

<sup>26</sup>Militello, 63.

to the one who leads the community, nor the last place as would presume a superficial sense of humility, rather in the symmetrical anomaly expressive of her interpretation of motherhood, sisterhood, and service, a discreet place, (the first with her back to the wall, seated at a table across the room from a similar table, which together enclosed the shortest and most central table where the abbess in monastic tradition would sit) strategically situated at the point of convergence and attention."<sup>27</sup>

To give birth to and live in fraternal minority (as it is not possible to be a brother or sister unless one considers oneself a lesser or minor to others), service—in the Church, in the community, and in whatever place—means knowing how to suffer. Therefore Clare, who is *mother*, *sister*, and *servant*, is also beautiful as the *Woman of suffering* for universal salvation.

4. There is a gift of the Holy Spirit which makes all who possess it *beautiful* with a superior light, a light which emanates from all the saints, and especially from all mystics. It is the gift of *intelligence*, or better stated, the *intellect*, which is *intus legere*, or contemplatively "reading within."

At the beginning of the second century A.D., Rabbi Aquibà said in a clear rabbinical hyperbole, "The world is not worthy of the day in which the *Canticle of Canticles* was given to Israel."<sup>28</sup> He also stated, "Even if the Torah had not been given to the world, the *Canticle of Canticles* would suffice for the guidance of the whole world."<sup>29</sup> If these statements are true, then it is also true that the Word in general, and that of the *Canticle* in particular, remain completely closed if the Spirit of the Lord does not make one "enter within." It is this Spirit, says Jesus, which will lead one to the complete truth (Jn. 16:13).

Clare lives during the period of the great women mystics of the North. Opening the list is Hildegard of Bingen, who antedates Clare by a century (1098-1179). In her principal work, (titled *Scivias: Know the Ways of God*), Hildegard speaks of the "umbra lucis viventis," the shadow of living light, which overwhelms her and introduces her to the ineffability of God.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>28</sup> *Yadaim* 3, 5. Cited by F. Raurell, *La lettura del "Cantico dei cantici" al tempo di Chiara e la "IV Lettera ad Agnese di Praga"* in *Laur.* 31 (1990) 198, hereafter cited as *La lettura del "Cantico."*

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> A. Führkötter-A. Carlevaris, *Hildegardis Scivias*. CCCM (*Corpus Christianorum. Continuatio Mediaevalis*) (Turnhout: 1978) 43. J. Leclercq-F. Vandenbroucke-L. Bouyer, *Histoire de la spiritualité chrétienne*, vol. II: *La spiritualité du Moyen Âge* (Paris: 1961), 221-226. Giovanna della Croce, *I mistici del Nord* (Rome: 1981).

During the thirteenth century, the century during which Clare lives, an extraordinary flourishing of women mystics occurs in the Low Countries. We bring to mind blessed Marie d'Oignies (1177-1213), whose biography was written by Jacques de Vitry, a man well-known in the Franciscan world for his writings on Clare and Francis. He had known the Poor Sisters of the monastery of St. Mary of Monteluca in Perugia since the year 1216.

Other women mystics of this era include Saint Christina the Astonishing (1235), Margaret of Ypres (1237), Lutgardis (1246), Juliana of Mount Cornillon (1258), Beatrice van Tienen (1200-1268), Mechtild of Magdeburg (1207-1295), and Hadewijch, an early thirteenth-century contemporary of Clare. In my opinion, because of her visions, poetry, and writings, Hadewijch truly is "the Great."

Gertrude of Helfta, also a woman mystic of the thirteenth century, is born only three years after the death of Clare (1256-1301). Another contemporary is Mechtild of Hackeborn (1241-1299).<sup>31</sup>

Concerning Saint Christina the Astonishing, we have the *Vita ed esperienze mistiche*, work of Thomas of Cantimpré, in *Acta Sanctorum*, July 5 (Venice: 1748), 650-660.

The fundamental study concerning Margaret of Ypres is that of G. Meersseman, *Les frères Prêcheurs et le mouvement dévot en Flandre au XIII siècle*, in *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum*, XVIII (1948) 69-130. There is also a *Vita Margaretae de Ypris* written by Thomas of Cantimpré, based on the oral testimony of Brother Sigero Da Lilla, and published by E. Meersseman in *Bibliotheca hagiographica latina antiquae et mediae aetatis* (Brussels: 1898-1901), vol. II, 789 ff., n. 5319, hereafter cited as *BHL*.

For Lutgardis, cf. *Vita Lutgardis*, of Thomas of Cantimpré, in *BHL* vol. II, 736 ff., n. 4950, not to mention an abundant bibliography.

The bibliography of Juliana of Mount Cornillon is very rich because the institution of the feast of *Corpus Domini* dates back to her revelations. This feast was first spread by the Bishop of Liège, Robert of Thourotte, in his diocese in 1246; in 1252, Legate Hugo of San Caro propagated the feast in Western Germany; and in 1264, Urban IV (Giacomo di Troyes, who was formerly the archbishop of Liège) disseminated the feast throughout the universal Church with the *Bull Transitus*. We have a *Vita* of Saint Juliana of Mount Cornillon in *Acta Sanctorum*, April 1 (Venice: 1737), 433 ff.

<sup>31</sup>The *Life of Marie d'Oignies* was written around 1215 by Jacques de Vitry, her confessor and spiritual director from 1207-1213: G. da Vitry, *Vita B. Mariae Oigniacensis*, in *Acta Sanctorum*, June 5 (Paris: 1867) 542-572; continued by Thomas of Cantimpré, *ibid.*, 572-581.

Beatrice van Tienen, Cistercian, is credited with an Autobiography and a mystical treatise: *Van seven manieren van heiligher minnen* (The seven ways of loving in a saintly manner), an experiential description of the ascension of the soul to God. Of these two works, there exists a French translation in *Vie spirituelle. Suppl. XIX* (1929), 307 ff.; the most modern and complete edition is in Flemish: *Beatrijs van Tienen. De autobiografie van de Z. Beatrijs van Tienen O. Cist. 1200-1268* (Antwerp: 1964).

Concerning *minne* or sacred love, cf. J. Leclercq, *L'amour vu par les moines au 12ème siècle* (Paris: 1962).

Of the Revelations of Mechtild of Magdeburg, exists a brief extract in Italian: *Luce fluente della divinità* (Brescia: 1957) of her work *Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit* (Einsiedeln: 1955) with a valuable commentary by H. U. von Balthasar. There is also a complete Latin edition of the *Revelations of Mechtild of Magdeburg* which also contains the *Revelations of Gertrude of Helfta*.

The works of Hadewijch are published in their entirety in Flemish: *De visionen van Hadewijch*, 2 vol. (Antwerp: 1947); *Mengeldichten*, (Antwerp: 1942); and in English: *Hadewijch, The Complete Works* (New York-Ramsey-Toronto: Paulist Press, 1980) with an introduction by Mother C. Hart and preface by Fr. Mommaers.

Gertrude of Helfta (or Gertrude "the Great") is known for two works of great value: the *Exercitia spiritualia*, a gem of ascetical-mystical literature containing various prayers and meditations of inspired beauty, and the *Revelations* or *Legatus divinae pietatis*, in five books originally written in good Latin and containing a nimble, musical style. The principal objective of the *Legatus* is the revelation of the great mystery of the love of God for man. Both works have been published by the Benedictines of Solesmes: *Revelationes Gertrudianae ac Mechtildianae* (Poitiers: 1875-1877).

Of Mechtild of Hackeborn is the *Liber specialis gratiae* (5 volumes), which treats her mystical experiences. An accessible edition in Italian is *Il libro della grazia speciale. Rivelazioni di S. Metilde*, with a preface by I. Schuster (Varese: 1939). The bibliography of Mechtild of Hackeborn is also very rich.

For all these women of God, the experience of love (*Minne*), which is expressed through the language of the *Canticle*, is fundamental.

Did these women have something in common?

If we recognize the possible role of the Cistercians in the life of Clare, it would appear that these women did share a common Cistercian influence. Clare may have been influenced by the first visitator of the Poor Ladies, who was a Cistercian, or by Gregory IX (Hugolino) and the papal curia who had close contacts with the Cistercians as well. Perhaps the greatest Cistercian



influence on Clare, though, is that of Bernard of Clairvaux whose *Sermon 33* is a commentary on the *Canticle of Canticles*.

The Cistercian connection of these woman, however, is very little and hardly relative, for the language which these women speak, the language of love, is always unrepeatably distinct. Clare too has a language of love all her own.

The gift of *intus legere*, this "reading within" the Word which creates a profound interior and exterior silence, is common. By virtue of this gift, Clare is a woman *silens*, a woman of silence. Celano apparently exaggerates this, saying, "when necessity demands that [the Poor Ladies] speak, they can hardly remember how to form the words as they should" (1Cel 20).

This silence created by "reading within" does not blind, but rather welcomes, the Word which reflects us (the image of the mirror in the writings of Clare), illumines us, and selects in the heart every word (with a lowercase "w") before pronouncing it. This was the case with Clare to the extent that "her speech was always about the things of God" (Proc II, 10), as is stated by Benvenuta of Perugia, a witness in the *Process of Canonization*. The great discovery of Clare is that silence is the language of love. Of this, Clare writes in a letter to Agnes of Prague: "Let the tongue of the flesh be silent when I seek to express my love for you; and let the tongue of the Spirit speak, because the love that I have for you, O blessed daughter, can never be fully expressed by the tongue of the flesh, and even what I have written is an inadequate expression" (4LAg 35-36).

In the intellect, as a gift of the Holy Spirit, one's attention is polarized on that which is in itself immutable. That which God was, this is; that which God made, this makes and will always make, immutably, but always in a new way, like a fountain of living water which never ceases to inundate, blinding the intellect with Light. The movement, the external change, is nothing compared with the enlightenment of the Spirit in the interior world.

Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the image of the Word is impressed in the intellect. This enlightenment leads to a deeper understanding of the Word as the Alpha and the Omega, as the only source of love and salvation. It also allows Clare (as it does for Francis) to penetrate the hearts of her sisters with a single glance, expanding their consciousness, giving them the gifts of superior knowledge and prophecy, and enabling them to distinguish between truth and falsehood, the good and the bad.

Concerning this point I must say another thing. Liliana Cavani beautifully and rightly states, "Francis is great because of his capacity for re-learning and



for having had the value of taking Clare as a mentor."<sup>32</sup> Another expression of hers is even more beautiful: "The *Canticle of the Creatures* seems also to be an inventory of all the beautiful things which exist in the world, so that they might be enjoyed anew in an evangelical way."<sup>33</sup> Eloi Leclerc, too, has produced a reading of the *Canticle of the Creatures* or "*Symbols of Union*."<sup>34</sup>

It has been written, "The Spirit of the Lord fills the world, is all-embracing, and knows what man says" (Wis 1:7). The cosmic consciousness of Francis and Clare, their embrace of the universe which allows them to enter into all creatures, animate and inanimate, is a Gift of the Spirit. They are able to feel the single and unrepeatable "stamp" of each creature. They understand the "voice" which vibrates with a particular timbre, pierces the universe like a sound wave, and is unstoppable.... This is the gift of the Spirit of the Lord known as "science."

Francis and Clare know (*jadà*) the "name" of every creature as a primordial copy of the Garden of Eden. They profoundly understand and enjoy all—the rock, the fire, the bird, sister water, brother wind, the most imperceptible vibration of a leaf when the sky darkens, and the movement of a blade of grass when sister earth clothes herself in green—through the gift of "science" which they have received.

It is precisely this gift which, having felt the vibration of each being, permits them also to perceive in its entirety the immense harmony of the Universe. They perceive the Spirit, the *ruah*, as a wind which enters into each creature, thus causing it to vibrate. The vibration of the entire universe as caused by the Spirit thus becomes an immense harmony in which each creature sounds his or her unique note. Paradise will be this complete harmony of all creatures who have done the Will of the Father. It will be an immense chorus, or as the Apocalypse states, "the sound of rushing water" (1:15). This sound however will not be like the crash of a waterfall, but rather the harmony produced by a myriad of individual drops, each having its own voice.

This "immense chorus," this diamond with a thousand facets which is made resplendent by an interior Light and kept in continual movement by the activity of the Spirit, is contained in the brown-habited arms of Clare and

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<sup>32</sup>Cf. "Conversazione tra Liliana Cavani, Frederic Raurell e Dino Dozzi," in *Laur.* 31 (1990) 409.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 408.

<sup>34</sup>E. Leclerc, O.F.M., *The Canticle of the Creatures, Symbols of Union* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977).

Francis who sustain the harmony of the world, returning it to the Father. This is cosmic praise. This is *cosmic beauty*.

Is Clare learned? What her *Rule* states is certain: "Let those who do not know how to read not be eager to learn. Let them rather devote themselves to what they should desire to have above all: the Spirit of the Lord" (RCI X 8-9).<sup>35</sup> It would, however, be ridiculous to read this sentence without recalling that this new woman of the Spoleto valley holds in her hands the immense and brilliant gifts of the Spirit, intellect and "science."

I have said too many things, but it seemed necessary to have said it all.

5. It is necessary to recall, though briefly, the *beauty* of Clare for having remained to the end marvelously *small* in the hands of the Father: "Go calmly in peace.... [He] has always guarded you as a mother does her child who loves her." (Proc III 20)

6. Clare is *beautiful*, in fact very *beautiful*, because she is *in love with* the "most beautiful of the children of men." Clare cites this passage from Psalm 44:3 in her *Second Letter to Agnes of Prague*, encouraging Agnes to contemplate her Spouse who is "more beautiful than the children of men." (2LAg 20). This phrase however is so personalized that it does not even appear to be a citation inasmuch as what it is for Clare: an experience.

Bernardine of Sienna maintains that one is transformed into that which one loves. Augustine, likewise, speaks of the beauty of the prerogative of the one who is in love with the most beautiful man whom history has ever known, Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>36</sup> This prerogative is not only taking him into one's arms as a newborn infant wrapped in swaddling clothes, but also to unite in his wounds more than the Magdalen. (Cf. 4LAg 19, 26).

Yes, in Clare, the language of the *Canticle of Canticles* is indeed concrete, real, abundant, and almost embarrassing, as in the *Fourth Letter*. Clare speaks of running after the Spouse who, in the language of the *Canticle*, brings his espoused into the wine-cellar (wine and love are the same thing in the *Canticle*), that is to say, the wedding chamber where the banquet of love is celebrated. And the following words of the *Canticle*, "His left hand will

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<sup>35</sup>Et nescientes litteras non curent litteras discere; sed attendant quod super omnia desiderare debent: habere Spiritum Domini...." *Opuscula*, 179.

<sup>36</sup>"The Virgin in the strict sense is the beloved of the most beautiful of the children of men:" St. Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, XI 11, *Patrologie Latine*, 40, 401.

support my head," signify, according to the precious study of the *Fourth Letter* by Raurell,<sup>37</sup> the total abandonment to love.

There, in the banquet of love, it all happens. "Totally love Him...whose beauty the sun and thy moon admire" (3LAg 15-16),<sup>38</sup> whose beauty is contemplated by the most luminous creatures of the world. Then it becomes easy to pass "happily" (*feliciter*) says Clare,<sup>39</sup>—and the adverb is found neither in the *Canticle* nor in the commentary by William of Saint-Thierry—to the "Clarity of eternal light," (Proc III 32), as is expressed in the humble language of Sister Filippa.

In conclusion, the name, "Clare," was foretold by the divine light which pierced the womb of her mother Ortulana and the rose-window of the ancient cathedral, the Mystic Rose which brings the Sun of the East down to the altar. The second name of Clare, however, would also have been prophetic: "You shall be called 'My Delight,' and your land Espoused" (Isaiah 62:4).

For all these reasons, Clare is for me, "a beautiful woman."

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<sup>37</sup>La lettura del "Cantico," 198-291.

<sup>38</sup>Concerning the relation (similarity) between the *Fourth Letter* and the *Passio S. Agnetis*, from which these references of Clare are taken, cf. *La lettura del "Cantico,"* 252.

<sup>39</sup>*La lettura del "Cantico,"* 292.