

**St. Clare:
The Eight Hundredth Anniversary of
Her Death**

LETTER of the four ministers general of the Franciscan family to the Poor Clares, to all Franciscan religious, and to those in the entire world who love Clare and Francis, on the occasion of the 800th anniversary of the death of St. Clare (1193—1993)

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“Documentum quo centenarium clarianum indicitur:
Ottavo centenario della nascita di Santa Chiara d’Assisi,
Documento di indizione”

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FOREWORD

Brothers and sisters in St. Francis: "True peace from heaven and sincere love in the Lord!"¹

Through our letter *Clare of Assisi: A New Woman*, we turn our voice to you Poor Clares,² and to all cloistered Franciscan women, to our brothers and to all in the whole world who love Clare and Francis, to remember our sister and mother, St. Clare, on the eight hundredth anniversary of her birth.

The celebration of this anniversary will begin on August 11, 1993, and will end on October 5, 1994.

The Clarian centenary proposes to bring forth again the human and evangelical values that Clare of Assisi brought to life in her time by making of herself a disciple of the Gospel and the humble "little plant of blessed Francis of Assisi."³ Today we still are astonished when we realize how heroic was the choice she made, and the refreshing maturity and wisdom she showed in evaluating the good things of our existence.⁴ Clare, a young girl of nobility and wealth, chose most austere poverty and the hidden life of prayer in order to contemplate God, the supreme good and the highest love, from Whom come every good thing and without Whom there is no good thing, as our Seraphic Father St. Francis counsels us.⁵

Clare permitted herself to be guided by the Spirit and "delighted in hearing the word of God."⁶ She found joy in prayer night and day.⁷ She immersed herself in contemplation, loved the Eucharist and was devoted to Christ's passion and to that of Mary, the most holy mother of God. Clare led a life of constant penance, worked with her own hands, was happy in infirmity, and above all, she "langished with love."⁸

Once again interiorly putting on Christ after the example of Francis,⁹ and modeling herself on the Blessed Virgin Mary,¹⁰ Clare became

¹*EpFid* 1.

²*2 Cor.* 6:11.

³*RCl* I 3.

⁴*I Cel* 18.

⁵*ExpPat* 3-4.

⁶*Proc* x 8.

⁷*Ibid.* I 7.

⁸*LegCl* 11. See *Song of Sol.* 2:5.

⁹*Ibid.* 4.

¹⁰*LegCl* Preface.

the mirror of every virtue,¹¹ teacher of perfection, and book of life.¹² The spell of her evangelical life drew many young girls, and Clare became the "mother of a group of virgins" who left everything "for love of her heavenly Spouse."¹³ But Clare's witness is more vast and efficacious, strongly making itself felt on every class of people.¹⁴ And still today, after so many centuries, Clare of Assisi remains a teacher of life, the New Woman who becomes a light on our journey. Her example and her intercession can "bring forth these beautiful flowers with which the church today is happily adorned."¹⁵

It is with this forward look and with great faith in the Holy Spirit that we, the ministers general of the First and the Third Orders Regular of the Franciscan family announce the centenary of Clare, to be celebrated in the most suitable manner, in accord with different situations and with Franciscan creativity.

May the blessing of St. Clare be with you always. We also add our brotherly blessing.

Rome, May 19, 1991

Solemnity of Pentecost

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¹¹*Proc IV 17; V 2; LegCl 62; Bull of Canonization 1—2.*

¹²*Proc X 2; Bull of Canonization 14.*

¹³*LegCl 10.*

¹⁴*Ibid., 10—11.*

¹⁵*Ibid., 11.*

Clare and Francis: Two Inseparable Legends¹⁶

1. The visit of His Holiness John Paul II to the Poor Clares at the protomonastery in Assisi on March 12, 1982, will go down in history also for his spontaneous address. Expressing a personal intuition, His Holiness affirmed some things never before mentioned by a pope on the subject of Francis, of Clare, and even on their mutual relationship.

"It is really difficult," said the Holy Father, "to distinguish these two names: Francis and Clare; these two phenomena: Francis and Clare; these two legends: Francis and Clare.... When you celebrate Clare's anniversary you must do so with great solemnity." It is difficult to separate the names of Francis and Clare. There is something deep between them that can be understood only through criteria of Franciscan, Christian, and evangelical spirituality. It cannot be understood by human criteria. The double name Francis—Clare is a reality understood only by Christian, spiritual, heavenly values. But it is also a reality of this earth, of this city, of this church.

Everything has taken place here. It is not a question of pure spirit. They were not pure spirits. They were bodies, persons, spirits. But in the living tradition of the church, of the whole of Christianity, of humanity, only the legend remains. What remains is how Francis saw his sister, the manner in which he espoused Christ. He saw himself in her image as a spouse of Christ, the mystical spouse with whom he was attaining sanctity. Francis looked upon himself as a brother, a little poor man, in the image of the holiness of this authentic spouse of Christ. In Clare Francis finds the image of the most perfect spouse of the Holy Spirit, Mary most holy.

Behold the place where, for eight centuries, so many pilgrims have come to contemplate the legend of Clare side by side with Francis. It is

¹⁶For Clare's writings and for writings pertaining to St. Clare, see Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M.Cap., ed. and trans., *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents* (New York and Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1988); used by permission of Paulist Press. For Francis's writings, see Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M.Cap. and Ignatius C. Brady, O.F.M., eds. and trans., *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works, Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York, Ramsey and Toronto: Paulist Press, 1982); used by permission of Paulist Press. For Thomas of Celano's writings see *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies: English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, ed. Marion A. Habig, O.F.M. (Franciscan Herald Press: Chicago, 1973); used by permission of Franciscan Herald Press.

a legend that has greatly influenced the life of the church and the history of Christian spirituality.

In our times it is necessary to rediscover St. Clare because it is important for the life of the church. It is necessary to bring to light again that charisma, that location. We must rediscover the legend of Francis and Clare.¹⁷

2. Following upon this fact, which is unique in Franciscan history, one can sense the basic unity and reciprocity of evangelical life, incarnated by Francis and Clare so that they might follow the Lord and His mother, in the Spirit, in the churches and through the church, in the service of all humanity and of the entire cosmos: Francis and Clare at the feet of all, as befits Friars Minor and sisters living in poverty as faithful penitents. Now, in order that such a unique evangelical life be concretized in a plurality of forms, according to different people, times and places, it is essential that what the Lord Himself has joined together must not be separated.

In fact, according to Clare, even from the beginning, the Crucified, Who spoke to Francis from the famous oriental-Syrian icon of San Damiano, foreshadowed the future foundation of the Poor Clares. Moved by the Spirit, like Mary, they would repair and restore the church, the house of God, side by side with Francis, continuing the work of Christ, poor and crucified.

This idea of identifying with the person of Christ and of Mary is so strong and all-encompassing that all Poor Clares, in union with all the faithful, feel personally called to be "faithful penitents," an image and example (Francis) or mirror (Clare) of Christ and of Mary in the church and in the world. Thus will they make present among men and reconciled creatures the persons of Christ and of Mary. Thus, Francis and Clare give us the proper measure of their evangelical life of union with God, with humanity, with the universe, as though personifying, in a cosmic manner, the only Son of God, incarnate, firstborn of many brothers.¹⁸

In concluding the day of prayer in Assisi, October 27, 1986, John Paul II recommended to all men and women of our times the "daily reading of Francis and Clare," that man of peace and woman of prayer, in working for universal peace, justice and charity.¹⁹

3. This, therefore, is the essence of evangelical life: to be one family in heaven and on earth with Christ and Mary, living in universal

¹⁷*Con Francesco nella Chiesa* (Rome, 1983), pp. 116—18.

¹⁸Rom. 8:29; *Adm VI*.

¹⁹See paragraph no. 59 of this letter (above).

brotherhood as befits servants — men and women subject to all creatures. This is the essential experience of the evangelical and ecclesial life lived not only by Francis, the little poor man, but also by Clare, his poor little plant, and by the entire universal family. This life bears witness to the Good News of the liberation of the poor and humble and of our sister Mother Earth itself.

Nevertheless, while we in our own times wish to reaffirm this message of Francis and Clare, all of us — Friars Minor, poor sisters, faithful penitents of our numerous fraternities — feel that we must sincerely confess to being useless servants, having so far lived in a limited way the Gospel ideal in spirit and truth. We admit this in the spirit of that continuous conversion to which we are called by Francis, who wants us to be “untiring in the resolution of a holy renewal”²⁰ and disposed to begin again from the beginning.

Only by this sincere confession and disposition to pursue once again with greater determination our journey of intimacy with God and the service of our brethren can we, especially, dare to risk addressing ourselves to all others and rediscover the testimony of Clare, the little plant of Francis.

Part 1

Lady Clare of Assisi: A New Woman

4. It is very difficult to discover the human aspect of a person of the Middle Ages. This is especially true in the case of a woman, since the official model of a “woman saint” must meet certain pre-established rules. Moreover, direct sources have, in great part, become available only in recent times. This is especially true for the *Acts of the Process of the Canonization of St. Clare*, the integrity of her *Letters*, and Clare’s *Testament*. Although at least half of the *Rule* seems to be taken from Francis, on whom it greatly depends, it was only in her last years that she received confirmation of the *Privilege of Poverty* that Innocent III had given in 1216. Only a difficult process of discernment can succeed in digging out from biographic sources sure facts, hidden under a style of hagiography that tends to exalt heroic sanctity and shies from the life of the ordinary person. Nevertheless, by distinguishing between the literary style required in a letter and the legal style imposed by the Roman curia for drawing up a *Rule*, as well as the procedures required for the canonization of a saint, it seems possible to bring out Clare’s

²⁰ ICel 103.

personality seen within the environment of her family and the society of Assisi and Europe of her day.

Without speaking of a very unusual woman of the twelfth century, Hildegard of Bingen, let us instead mention Ortolana, Clare's mother, a truly "valiant woman." Other examples of renowned women, virgins and widows, often of noble origin, are: Filippa Mareri, Diane of Andalo, Agnes of Prague, Lutgarde of Tongeren, Elizabeth of Thuringia, Blanche of Castille, Hedwig of Silesia, Cunegunda of Poland, Mathilda of Magdenburgh, Constance of Hungary, Julienne of Liège, Marie of Oignies, and Hedwig of Anversa. By their good name and their good works toward the poor who were so numerous at that time, these women shine in the church, living the norms of a society of troubadours, chivalry and courtesy. Among their other virtues, special praise must be given to the exemplary care they gave to their home and family, and the performance of their daily tasks. Praiseworthy, too, were their warmth, courtesy, openness to hospitality, their interest in cultural, civic, and political activities. Finally, how laudable was their great mercy towards the weak and the poor! They were women of discretion and good sense as befits one who could be called, at home and outside the home, a *madonna*, a lady.

5. Clare, who from her youth, reveals herself truly "a lady," stands out from all as unique — unlike anyone else. She is strong of stature, courageous, creative, charming, endowed with a rare human and motherly sensitivity, open to every good and beautiful love for God, for men and women, and for all creatures. She is a mature person, sensitive to every human and divine value. In imitation of that noble and chivalrous ideal personified by Lancelot, Clare is disposed, at whatever cost, even with acts of humility, to arrive at becoming the "little servant" who searches for his lady, even by acts of heroism and mortification.

Among all the women mentioned above, Clare is the only one to give to the church and to humanity a family of Poor Sisters, who still today number 18,000 members. She is the only one to write her own *Rule*, and to have the courage to ask of the astonished Pope Innocent III the *Privilege of Poverty*. We stand indeed before a "new woman," as Pope Alexander IV was to write in the *Bull of Canonization*.

6. It is worth the trouble to get to know more closely the mystery of the secret of this "new woman," although it may be difficult, at such a distance in time, to uncover the true image and depth of her human heart. It is worth recalling the opinion, which came to light after his death, of Paul Sabatier, the Protestant scholar so strongly attracted to Francis and Clare: "The person of Clare is not only a reproduction of Francis, founder of the order. On the other hand, her personality cannot be discovered exclusively from official biographical data. She appears as one of the noblest people in hagiography. One has the impression

that, out of humility, she has remained behind the scenes. But others, too, have not taken her into proper consideration, perhaps because of an overly cautious attitude, or even rivalry among the different Franciscan groups. If there were not such reticence, Clare would today be considered one of the greatest feminine figures in history.²¹

Therefore, in order to find traces of Clare's true greatness as a person (in the Middle Ages there was not much sensitivity to the "person") one must pay special attention to details. One must almost read between the lines and even delve into non-official and non-hagiographic sources. Even before going to any other document, one must refer to her *Testament*. It is her most personal and autobiographical writing. Reference must also be made to chapter 6 of her *Rule*, which is autobiographical. Finally one must consult the *Acts of the Process of Canonization of St. Clare*, where contemporary eyewitnesses, be it her sisters or others, speak under oath.

Young Clare in Her Family and Cultural Surroundings

7. From birth, Clare received her earliest formation in the noble and chivalric surroundings of her family. Her father was a soldier, a knight-warrior, often absent from home. To his wife, Ortolana, mother and heart of the family, he entrusted the management of the home and the personal education of their three daughters: Clare, Catherine (who would later receive from Francis the name Agnes) and Beatrice. Because she was of a noble family, Ortolana was, on the one hand, taken up with the feminine and motherly skill involved in the practical care of her domestic duties, which were greater in a home naturally open to the nobility of Assisi, and on the other hand, with the careful attention to the human and religious formation of her family. These duties were so well organized and in harmony with each other that Ortolana had time to make pilgrimages to far-off places, and to care for the poor in the surroundings of the town.

Crafts, such as spinning and weaving, were among the important domestic chores popular in Clare's day. In time, Clare proved herself a master in these arts. Her cultural development, like that of young girls of the nobility, included learning to read and write. Reading materials were drawn from the Psalter, and from tales of chivalry novels, history, stories of knighthood, jesters, troubadours. These were of Franco-Belgian origin and very widespread, even in Italy.

²¹Paul Sabatier, *Etudes inédites sur s. François d'Assise*, ed. Arnold Goffin (Paris, 1932), p. 12.

Especially famous were the heroic deeds of the Round Table, with protagonists like King Arthur, Charlemagne, and Princes Roland and Lancelot. These were tales of valor, sometimes superhuman and even humiliating. They were undertaken by the noble candidate for knighthood to honor king, emperor, master, his adored lady, or the church. In some cases they were undertaken to defend the poor and the weak. These sung and dramatized the summons to fidelity in life and death, which awakened admiration in young girls and women and the yearning to perform courageous acts.

8. At the same time, this atmosphere of "courtesy" favored the birth and development of a certain new concept of passion and the art of love, even in an erotic expression. It was conceived as a deep desire to be loved and to love with one's whole being. This love often finds its sublimation in Christ and the Virgin Mary. It is even found in deep love of friendship among people, and finally toward all creatures. The verbal expressions of such a love are those of the classical, biblical, and ordinary symbols of conjugal love, or those of a mystical nature. Thus, the *Canticle of Canticles* becomes a spring of inspiration, as for example in St. Bernard and the Cistercian School, especially so with William of St. Thierry. Clare seems close to this school. It is also found in the stream of noble love of Marcabru and of pure love (Minnemystik) of Beatrice of Nazareth and of Hadewijch. Unless we consider this concept of love, so widespread in Europe during the years 1150 to 1250, it is impossible to understand and follow this new and deep emotion in women. These women lived in an atmosphere of that nobility in which flourished and shone the little plant of Francis and her Poor Sisters and Ladies at San Damiano, at Prague, Monticelli and elsewhere, and which, in a few years, spread throughout the continent of Europe. The mysticism of "pure love," which was lived in brotherhood and great poverty and humility, was personified in the spiritual family of the Friars Minor, the Poor Sisters, and the new penitents. These felt themselves to be very close to the emerging generation of the poor and little ones who, up to this time, were outside the law of feudalism and class. This mysticism was becoming known and sought after by the emerging voiceless masses, who enjoyed no personal freedom.

9. In this historical context, even if we do not wish to take into account the miraculous vision of the motherly instinct with which Ortolana awaited Clare's birth as a shining light to the entire world, we can certainly recognize Clare as a person exceptionally endowed by nature and grace. She had an independent disposition. She was decisive and resourceful. With great determination Clare sought her place in the home and outside the home. Truly she was a gentle and strong personality.

We find evidence of this especially in the *Acts of the Process of Canonization of St. Clare*, where we have witnesses close to Clare, who knew her during her childhood in her father's house, even before she chose to become a religious. Here we see young Clare living at home with her mother. Her behavior is described as "honest and of good name, gentle and courteous." These are expressions of behavior typical of nobility. One also notes her devotion. She is penitent, merciful, and generous toward the poor. This, in short, is a model of life respected by everyone, in and out of the home. A great part of the credit for this formation certainly goes to Ortolana, a woman of prayer, industrious, open to works of mercy even beyond the circle of her neighbors.

Outside the home Clare was reserved, discreet, silent. Contrary to the behavior of other lovely girls in her society, she did not seek to be admired. As one of her sisters explicitly states in the *Process*, Clare refused every proposal of marriage with firmness, without giving her suitors any motive for hope. She was already entirely taken up with the Lord, and devoted herself to prayer and to works of charity toward the poor. Like her mother, she recognized in herself that form of life practiced by many young girls and women in all of Europe, even if they did not wish to enter a monastery or a convent: women who were religious, penitent, the poor of Christ, withdrawn from the world, lay religious.

Witnesses from Her Childhood and Youth

10. Clare's sister Beatrice testifies that her sister lived as a virgin from her youth. She was absorbed in good works and enjoyed the good name of all.²² Advised by Francis, she left everything, sold her property and a part of Beatrice's, and gave the money to the poor.²³

Sister Pacifica, Clare's intimate friend since childhood, entered San Damiano as a first companion with Agnes. She confirms all that has been said and adds that "she served her for the most part almost day and night."²⁴ She also affirms that Clare's parents were both of the nobility, and especially she cites Clare's mother as an example of piety and charity toward the poor. Sister further adds that Ortolana went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, to Rome, and to Monte Gargano.²⁵ She also says that when she went visiting at Clare's home, she never saw her father, the knight. This confirms the frequent absence of knights from their homes.

²² *Proc* XII 1.

²³ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, I 4.

Bona, Pacifica's blood sister, is Clare's confidant on the occasions of her secret conversations with Francis before embracing the religious life. She had lived in Clare's home and had often spoken with her. She can therefore testify that "she [Clare] used to send to the poor the food she herself was supposed to have eaten; and she, the witness, testified that many times she had brought it to them."²⁶ Bona also states that "many times [she, Lady Bona] accompanied her to speak to St. Francis. She went secretly so as not to be seen by her parents."²⁷ She also testifies that "at the time she [Clare] entered religion she [Clare] was a prudent young girl of eighteen years. She had always stayed in the house, hidden, not wanting to be seen by those who passed in front of her house. She was also very kind and took care of all other good deeds."²⁸ Finally, Bona recalls that Clare, while still in the world, would give her "a certain amount of money as a votive offering and directed her to carry it to those who were working on St. Mary of the Portiuncula, so that they would sustain the flesh."²⁹ Perhaps we have here Clare's first gesture of affection for the young Poverello and his companions.

11. We also wish to cite two male witnesses: neighbors and friends of Clare's father and of the family. The first of the two, Ranieri de Bernardo, expressly states that Clare "had a beautiful face."³⁰ She never consented to marriage proposals arranged either by her parents or by others; instead she did all she could to follow Francis — the sooner the better.³¹ The second, Pietro de Damiano, confirms all that Ranieri had said. Both emphasize Clare's unshakable will to consecrate herself to a life of virginity and of poverty.³²

Just as important, finally, is the special testimony of John Ventura, who during Clare's youth lived in Clare's home as a servant. He is, therefore, a firsthand witness. With understandable pride this servant speaks of the nobility and the grand style of living of the family which he served. He therefore refers to the fact that Clare was living the life of a religious.³³ As such, he says: "She saved the food they were given to eat, put it aside, and then sent it to the poor."³⁴ He also adds a detail

²⁶Ibid., XVII 1.

²⁷Ibid., 3.

²⁸Ibid., 4.

²⁹Ibid., 7.

³⁰Ibid., XVIII 2.

³¹Ibid., 2—4.

³²Ibid., XIX 2.

³³Ibid., XX 1—3.

more or less singular in the *Process*: "While she was still in her father's house, she wore a rough garment under her other clothes."³⁵ She actually dressed as a house servant and as people of the poor class. Thus she showed her intention to live like a poor servant or handmaid, even though she was the daughter of a wealthy and noble family.

This same witness gives us another significant detail: "She fasted, prayed, and did other pious deeds, as [I] had seen; and ... it was believed she had been inspired by the Holy Spirit from the beginning."³⁶

This testimony closes with: "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."³⁷

It is no wonder that such a young noblewoman, living as a penitent, as a religious woman in the world, revealed herself as she truly was, a "new" woman, as soon as she met Francis. In fact, she instinctively saw in him the "new" man, inspired by God, the Lord's minstrel, who passionately sang the blessedness and beauty of the love of the divine spouse in the person of Christ, the spouse "Who became the way for us." Clare describes him thus in her *Testament*. She tells how she converted to a life of evangelical penance, drawn by Francis, enamored of Christ whom he imitated.

The Beginnings of Her Conversion

12. We have different testimonies, even biographical information, on this decisive moment of her life. It is Clare herself, in fact, who gives us information of her conversion and that of her first sisters.

After having heard the message of the crucifix of San Damiano, which spoke to him, Francis foresaw the coming of "women" who would inhabit the church and the monastery that he was restoring. It is fitting that this prophecy be related by Clare in her *Testament* in a greatly detailed manner.

There is no doubt that Clare, as she most clearly states in her *Testament*, well understood what her vocation and that of her sisters would be. It was a vocation to community, living together with her other sisters. It was one of being in and for the church "an image in the example and mirror" of the Lord and of His mother, in order to repair (renew) His house.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

This gift comes from the Father of all mercies, the bestower of all good, through the medium of His servant, the blessed Francis, faithful imitator of His Son, Who from the beginning is our way: "In the Lord Jesus Christ, I admonish and exhort all my sisters, both those present and those to come, to strive always to imitate the way of holy simplicity, humility and poverty, and [to preserve] the integrity of our holy way of living, as we were taught from the beginning of our conversion by Christ and our blessed father Francis."³⁸

13. In order to understand more deeply the human person of Clare and her sisters at the time of their initial conversion, it is important to emphasize the intensity of their love of the Lord, and therefore to understand their joy in the trials that they must have undergone in that conversion which was certainly, humanly speaking, a painful one. Certain expressions used by Clare in regard to Francis confirm this. In her *Testament* Clare often uses the word 'blessed' and 'most blessed.' But the word 'lover'. Clare calls Francis 'lover and imitator' of the Lord. These words are more intense than 'loving' and 'friend'; they signify a person who loves with persevering passion and intensity. For Clare, therefore, Francis is already, at the moment of conversion, in love with and therefore an imitator of the Lord. Filled with joy in the Holy Spirit, he prophesied the future coming of the ladies to San Damiano. Clare uses the same word in her *Third Letter to St. Agnes of Prague* in the context of espousals. This explains clearly how Francis, Agnes, Clare, and the first sisters, at the moment of their conversion, notwithstanding personal and family difficulties, intended as spouses in love with the Holy Spirit to leave "the world" and its blind "lovers." Thus Clare, writing to Agnes of Prague, expressly affirms that from the beginning of their conversion the Lord showered His lovers with special sweetness in order to help them overcome the obstacles that can sometimes bring His chosen ones to the point of despair. Even Francis experienced this in his encounter with the lepers. This was before the Crucified at San Damiano spoke to him and he had the joy of predicting the coming of Clare and the sisters.

14. When writing to Agnes of Prague, Clare was aware of the great trials that she must have had to suffer at the time of her conversion. She speaks of them as "a cloud of sadness."³⁹ Clare encourages Agnes as she refers to the Virgin Mary, spouse and mother of the Son of God, who had experienced such great joy in being united with her divine spouse in Whom she was transformed:

³⁸*TestCl* 56—57.

³⁹*3LAg* 11.

So that you too may feel what His friends feel as they taste the hidden sweetness that God Himself has reserved from the beginning for those who love Him (Ps. 30:20; 1 Cor. 2:9). And, after all who ensnare their blind lovers in a deceitful and turbulent world have been completely sent away, you may totally love Him Who gave Himself totally for your love, Whose beauty the sun and the moon admire, Whose rewards and their preciousness and greatness are without end; I am speaking of Him Who is the Son of the Most High, Whom the Virgin brought to birth and remained a virgin after His birth. May you cling to His most sweet mother, who gave birth to a Son Whom the heavens could not contain. And yet she carried Him in the little enclosure of her holy womb and held Him on her virginal lap.⁴⁰

This same attitude of love of the Lord and joy in trials is found in chapter 4 of Clare's *Rule*. We even find here this biographical note where she speaks of the beginning conversion of the sisters. Further on we shall speak more fully about this chapter of the *Rule*.

15. We would like to cite here a literary source of a romantic-hagiographical nature which is set in a society of troubadours, where Francis and Clare appear as two young people of Assisi. We are referring to the so-called *Legend of St. Clare*.

Francis is twenty-nine or thirty years of age; Clare is eighteen:

Hearing of the then celebrated name of Francis, who, like a new man (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:3, 9—10), was renewing with new virtues the way of perfection forgotten by the world, she was moved by the Father of the spirits (Heb. 12:9), — whose initiatives each one had already accepted although in different ways — and immediately desired to see and hear him. No less did he desire to see and speak with her, impressed by the widespread fame of so gracious a young lady, so that, in some way, he, who was totally longing for spoil and [who] had come to depopulate the kingdom of the world, would be also able to wrest this noble spoil from the evil world (Gal. 1:4) and win her for his Lord. He visited her and she more frequently him, moderating the times of their visits so that this divine pursuit could not be perceived by anyone nor objected to by gossip. For, with only one close companion accompanying her, the young girl, leaving her paternal home, frequented the clandestine meetings with the man of God, whose words seemed to her to be on fire and whose deeds were seen to be beyond the human. The father Francis encouraged her to despise the world, showing her by his living speech how dry the hope of the world was and how deceptive its beauty. He whispered in her ears of a sweet espousal with Christ, persuading her to preserve the pearl of her virginal purity for that blessed Spouse Whom love made man.⁴¹

Another witness affirms the moral power, the spiritual fascination that Francis exercised over Clare. And Clare, herself an "example and mirror," can say at the end of her life after twenty-eight years of illness:

⁴⁰Ibid., 14—19.

⁴¹*LegCl* 5.

"After I once came to know the grace of my Lord Jesus Christ through his servant Francis, no pain has been bothersome, no penance too severe, no weakness has been hard."⁴²

16. Having wished for some time to espouse herself to the Lord, Clare is in haste to arrive at these divine nuptials, and she quickly makes her decision.⁴³ Truly, the spirit in the tales of chivalry finds a ready answer in the souls of Clare and Francis, both experts and enamored of that "pure love" mysticism which was then in fashion. The answer to their call is not long in coming.

For the newness of such great things went far and wide in the world, and everywhere it began to gain souls for Christ. Remaining enclosed, Clare began to enlighten the whole world, and her brilliance dazzled it with the honors of her praises. The fame of her virtues filled the chambers of noble ladies, reached the palaces of duchesses, even the mansions of their queens. The highest of the nobility stooped to follow her footprints and left its race of proud blood for her holy humility. After the invitation of Clare was made known, not a few, worthy of marriage to dukes and kings, did severe penance, and those who were married to rulers imitated Clare in their own way. Innumerable cities were enriched with monasteries; even fields and mountains were beautified with the structure of this celestial building. The cult of chastity intensified in the world under the leadership of Clare, and the renewed order of virgins was recalled in its midst. Today the church is happily adorned with these beautiful flowers that Clare brought forth, and with them she asks to be supported, saying: "Support me with flowers, encompass me with apples, because I languish with love" (Song of Sol. 2:5).⁴⁴

If we wish to look further into the reason for the novelty of Clare's way of life, we can say that in her, grace and nature formed a marvelous unity: grace builds on, even perfects nature. The novelty, in the long run, lies in Clare's remarkable personality in the context of the society of her day. We would like to bear witness to the call this quality of her — a holy way of life, or her ongoing conversion until her death.

The Balance of Maturity

17. The balance between the feminine and the masculine, which is the determining factor in the maturity of each human person, must also be sought in Clare. It is in this balance that she becomes a model for humanity, "as an example and mirror" for everyone.

What suddenly strikes one when confronted with Clare's personality is her strong temperament, which leads her to struggle against every

⁴²Ibid., 44.

⁴³Ibid., 6.

⁴⁴Ibid., 11.

obstacle that prevents her from pursuing that which she knows must be the way of life peculiar to her. But as we delve more deeply into her personality, our surprise increases as we gradually discover the harmonious balance of an exceptional humanness, which can only be called genial and exemplary for everyone.

However, something seems to be wrong with this picture. Clare has a certain excessive or extreme inclination toward bodily penance: nightly, tear-filled vigils, fasting and abstinence. Our perplexity is suggested by the same demon who insinuates to Clare not to cry because she might become blind, and not to do too much penance or she will end up being deformed. To this, Clare responds: "Whoever sees God will not be blind. Whoever knows the Lord suffers nothing that is twisted."⁴⁵

Clare's excessive penance was of concern even to Francis and the bishop of Assisi, who thought they must interfere. Francis, who himself was accustomed to severe bodily penance, at the end of his life wished to beg pardon of Brother Body. But even Clare had always shown great moderation and gentleness towards her sisters. She gives proof of this in her *Third Letter to St. Agnes of Prague*, where she tells how Francis exhorts celebrating feastdays "in a special way by a change of food" and how he "admonished us to show every possible discernment in matters of food" for the weak and the sick.⁴⁶ As for Agnes herself, regarding that prudent advice which Clare refused to apply to herself, she says: "But our flesh is not bronze nor is our strength that of stone. No, we are frail and inclined to every bodily weakness! I beg you, therefore, dearly beloved, to refrain wisely and prudently from an indiscreet and impossible austerity in the fasting that you have undertaken. And I beg you in the Lord to praise the Lord by your very life, to offer the Lord your reasonable service and your sacrifice always seasoned with salt."⁴⁷

18. The author of the *Legend of Clare* 18 gives a surprising and very convincing explanation in defense of these extreme practices of Clare: "While serious affliction of the body usually generates that of the spirit, it shone far differently in Clare. For she maintained a festive and joyful appearance in every one of her mortifications so that she seemed either not to feel her corporal afflictions or to laugh [at them]. From this it is clearly given to our understanding that the holy joy with which she was flooded within overflowed without, because the love of the heart lightens the scourges of the body."⁴⁸

⁴⁵Ibid., 19.

⁴⁶3LAg 30—31.

⁴⁷Ibid., 38—41.

A verse in the vernacular, in the literature of the troubadours, which must have been known to Francis and Clare, says: "So great the good I have in sight, that every pain is my delight."⁴⁸

All this shows a mature love in all its depths, be it towards God loved with the love of a spouse, or towards a human person like the most blessed Francis, who, after God, was Clare's support, true lover and imitator of Christ, an almost sacramental symbol of true love. It was thus from the very beginning when the crucifix of San Damiano, calling Francis by name, inspired him to prophesy the coming of Clare and the sisters, called to renew and sanctify the church, in a community of charity with him and his brothers.

Animated by this love, a gift of the Holy Spirit, Clare learned the discretion of wisdom, and soon she seemed to be gifted with discernment of spirits. Already while still living at home and later in the monastery, in addition to having "a strong and holy resistance," Clare showed great serenity and composure in all the tensions against which she had to struggle. She journeyed along her way, untroubled, without irritation, unrebelling. She always remained a faithful friend, mother, and dearest daughter of no matter how many opposed her, among whom were even the pope and cardinals.

19. With total clarity she knew how to recognize those things which were "necessary" — her way of life received from the Lord by way of Francis; the Privilege of Poverty; the spirit of prayer to which all temporal things must be subject; the Spirit of the Lord, to be desired above all things; unity in brotherly love. All this she clearly distinguished from what is "secondary": institutions, constitutions, rules, names, titles (abbess). In what was necessary she always adhered to divine instruction — as the breviary puts it: "attached to God's discipline." As for the rest, she accepted whatever it was possible and permissible to accept, without the fanaticism of the Waldensians, the Humiliati, Cathari and others. The strength of her personality as woman and mother is revealed in wise discernment — in basic faithfulness to whatever touched at the heart of her Gospel-Franciscan plan, and in calm acceptance of so many norms considered suitable or necessary by the Roman curia. Moreover, it is very symbolic that so many arguments that are marked by fanaticism, which tend to divide people, as for example the spiritual or literal observance of the *Rule*, seem to be foreign to the spirit of Clare. So much so that in chapter ten of the *Rule*, differing from Francis who speaks of spiritual observance, Clare inserts

⁴⁸ *LegCl* 18.

⁴⁹ *Fior* 48.

a Pauline text referring to the spirit of unity and charity, and bonds of perfection — whatever is opposed to dissension and division: "Let them be always eager to preserve among themselves the unity of mutual love, which is the bond of perfection" (*RCl X 7*). She thus succeeds in suggesting that the Spirit of the Lord and its holy operation consist in this mutual charity. It is above anything else desirable or practical, including love of enemies, even those who are of our own household. We must point out, moreover, that this balance, perfect as is, has nothing to do with that coldness sometimes found to a certain degree in the classical ascetic-mystical life. Clare always maintains her humanness and femininity.

20. Our evidence in this regard, which comes from the last week of Francis's life, has all the intensity of a strong and mature experience deeply shared by both Francis and Clare.

Both of them were grievously ill. Clare was afraid of dying before Francis without being able to see him. This may seem to be a weakness on her part. Instead it reveals the human strength of this woman who up to now had overcome all the tribulations, possible and impossible, so as to seem unbreakable, yet whose sensitivity was so intense.

She was overcome and: "She wept in bitterness of spirit and could not be consoled, because she was not able to see before her death her only father before God, that is to say St. Francis, her comforter in soul and body, who had established her in God's grace."⁵⁰

A great contemporary master of Franciscanism, Kajetan Esser, has written that Francis revealed his great holiness by being so human that on his deathbed, contrary to all canons of ascetic hagiography, he accepted sweets from Brother Jacopa. He not only accepted them, but he expressly asked for them. Can we not, in all honesty, say that Clare, too, reveals her own sanctity by showing herself to be a true woman, a daughter and mother to the dying Francis?

⁵⁰ *Assisi Comp.*, 109, in Armstrong, O.F.M.Cap., *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, p. 266. With her typical sense of initiative, Clare makes her concern known to Francis through the intermediary of a brother. At that, Francis, usually so severe and circumspect, loses his usual reserve, as he would later do in a similar situation involving Brother Jacopa. He immediately lets Clare know, through an affectionate letter written for her alone — "in the Holy Spirit," says the hagiographer. He blesses her personally, forgives her every fault and reassures her that she will see him again. The writer comments that Francis always kept in his heart the first days of Clare's conversion and the saintly life she was leading: "Her conversion was edifying not only to the order of brothers, but also to the universal church of God."

The Strong Woman

21. We can sum up, in outline form, other aspects of Clare's personality — aspects which, when found in men, are usually not too surprising, but when found in a woman, are really surprising.

1. First of all, the refusal of every marriage proposal, arranged either by the family or by relatives;
2. Her flight to St. Mary of the Angels at the age of eighteen, with its consequent break of family and social ties;
3. The giving up of her noble state to take on that of "servant";
4. Her acceptance of Agnes (her former name was Catherine) and the subsequent resistance to the male domination of relatives;
5. The physical and moral tribulations she faced in order to preserve, even to the end, the vocation the Lord had given through Francis;
6. Her constant refusal to act as abbess (or Lady), wishing to be considered and act as a handmaid, the servant of her sisters, going so far as seeking the most mortifying duties;
7. The *Privilege of Poverty*, the only one of its kind at the time, which she defended against all opposition, even that of popes and cardinals. This defense often depended on her alone, notwithstanding the support of Agnes of Prague (Bohemia), of Sister Agnes, and even of Brother Elias;
8. Her controlled and calm resistance against the Saracens and other enemies of Assisi.

Clare's brave struggle to defend her Form of Life or *Rule* shows courage, intelligence, and wisdom. This struggle was carried on in a spirit of peace, contrary to that of fanatical reformers and advocates of poverty so much in vogue at the time. In daily community life Clare, contrary to every classic feudal practice, introduced the unconditional "sisterliness" of sisters living in poverty. This is evidenced by a unity born of mutual charity, which is more than motherly, and of co-responsibility and participation on the part of everyone, even the least of the sisters.

Bitter debates among the brothers over the "letter" and the "spirit" were a threat to fidelity to the unique evangelical- Franciscan way of life. The basic unity of the Franciscan family of the Friars Minor and the sisters was being compromised. After Francis's death, Clare faced the situation alone, as "mother" of the order founded by her "most blessed father."

Clare considered total fidelity to Christ and to Mary the only thing necessary. She lived this fidelity with discernment and full balance with what was secondary. Everything was lived at the service of her greatest espoused Love: norms of the enclosure, silence, prayer, and practices of poverty. Unity was thus expressed in a healthy and holy pluriformity.⁵¹

The Tenderness of 'Madonna' (Lady) Clare

22. The expression 'Madonna' or 'Lady' brings us back to the *Acts of the Process of Canonization of St. Clare*, in which the sisters loved to address their mother in this manner.

As we have observed before, Clare's strong and tender femininity goes back to the early years spent at home, where she lived and grew in the model environment created by her mother, Ortolana. She was affable, courteous, hospitable, pious, devoted, and dedicated to the ordinary domestic chores found in a home such as hers. She was generous to the poor and lived in the world as a poor penitent of Christ.

Clare was full of noble ideas and open to acts of courage for love of Christ. She was capable of heroic deeds. When she heard of the first Franciscan martyrs she wanted to leave for Morocco to become a martyr. But she was also capable of acts of humility in the service of the poorest of the poor.

Clare attached special importance to interpersonal relations among the sisters in the internal affairs of the community. She maintained that this motherly love towards one another should serve as example and mirror to the church and to the entire world.

Clare's femininity and motherliness is also evident in the spirit of service with which she performed humble and hidden tasks in imitation of Jesus, Who washed the feet of His disciples. Some of these are absent even from the *Rule of Francis*. Among these regular duties are the bodily and spiritual needs of individual sisters and of the community. In caring for each other, the need of each individual person must be the rule. Special attention must be given to the young, the sick and those who are weak, not only physically but also morally. The maximum of responsibility is stressed. Words like 'our', 'ours', 'everyone', 'common use', 'mutual unity in charity' recur over and over again. Still others refer to the motherly care of the abbess, who should be mother and handmaid, a sister among sisters. She should be obeyed out of love, not fear. She should not glory in having privileges nor indulge in particular friendships. She should be the last refuge of the afflicted. In this way she must exact silence, penance, enclosure, prayer and poverty, always with the moderation of dealing with real people.

23. This filial and motherly temperament of Clare is confirmed in chapters six to ten of her definitive *Rule*. The key themes to understanding Clare's heart and her plan of evangelical-Franciscan life all come together here. These are:

⁵¹2Cel 192.

1. The life of daughters and spouses of the Holy Spirit, who have chosen to follow to the end Christ and His mother, without having any possessions (chap. 6);
2. The spirit of prayer, to which every thing else must yield (chap. 7);
3. A life of poverty, following the example of the Lord and of Mary, His mother (chap. 8);
4. A life of sisterly and motherly charity (chap. 8);
5. Mutual forgiveness, the true prerequisite for prayer (chap. 9);
6. To seek, above all else, the Spirit of the Lord in unity and sisterly love, which is the bond of perfection (chap. 10);
7. To seek the height of love which extends to all enemies (chap. 10).

These are the dimensions of tenderness that we find expressed in Clare's *Third Letter to St. Agnes of Prague*. They confirm Clare's geniality, even in the control of her own emotional life.

Clare: A Christian Woman

24. According to quite a reliable source we learn that "Francis shunned familiarity with any woman and did not permit women to treat him in any familiar way. He seemed to show affection only to blessed Clare. Nevertheless, when speaking to or of her, he never called her by her name but referred to her as a 'Christian lady' (or 'Christian woman'). He took great care of her and of her monastery."⁵² The source of this detail is perhaps Brother Stefano, who was Francis's constant companion and who had been cured of an illness by Clare. It is clear that Francis dearly loved Clare and the sisters and cared for them as carefully as he did his brothers. He never addressed Clare alone but rather in the presence of the sisters.

It is certain that Francis called Clare 'Christian' because he saw in her a real Christian, something of the Blessed Virgin. Perhaps in calling the lepers 'Brother Christians' he saw in them something of the crucified Lord.

John Paul II, to whom we referred in the beginning, sensed the reason for Francis's deep love for Clare: "He saw himself as a brother, a Poverello, in the likeness of the sanctity of this true spouse of Christ. In her he found the image of Mary most holy, the most perfect spouse of the Holy Spirit."⁵³ This is the authoritative message of our day. It

⁵²See L. Oligier, *Descriptio codicis Sancti Antonii de urbe unacum appendice textuum de Sancto Francisco*, *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 12 (1919):321-401. This paragraph appears on pp. 382-84, no. 5. 38. John Paul II, cited above in no.1 of this letter.

⁵³John Paul II, cited above in no. 1 of this letter.

expresses the vital essence of Clare's spirituality and makes her a symbol for our times.

Clare.

The Testament

25. The *Testament* is essential for discovering Clare's personality as a Christian. It is in this very personal document that she speaks about her vocation and that of the sisters:

Almost immediately after his conversion, when he had neither brothers nor companions, while he was building the Church of San Damiano, where he was totally visited by divine consolation and impelled to completely abandon the world, through the great joy and enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, the holy man made a prophecy about us that the Lord later fulfilled. For at that time, climbing the wall of that church, he shouted in French to some poor people who were standing nearby: "Come and help me in the work [of building] the Monastery of San Damiano, because ladies will again dwell here who will glorify our heavenly Father (Matt. 5:16) throughout His holy, universal church by their celebrated holy manner of life." ... And our most blessed father prophesied not only for us, but also for those who would come to this [same] holy vocation to which the Lord has called us.⁵⁴

[And she continues:] For the Lord Himself has placed us not only as a form for others in being an example and mirror, but even for our sisters whom the Lord has called to our way of life as well, that they in turn might be a mirror and example to those living in the world. Since the Lord has called us to such great things that those who are to be a mirror and example to others may be reflected in us, we are greatly bound to bless and praise God and be all the more strengthened to do good in the Lord.⁵⁵ All the sisters, therefore, in their own person (we) are called to be the 'form' of an example and mirror to each other and to the entire church throughout the world. We must be an example and mirror of what or of whom? Of the Son of God, Who has become for us the way, as our most blessed father Francis showed and taught us. The actual realization of this vocation occurred shortly after Francis's conversion, when Clare and the sisters freely promised him obedience: "We went to dwell in the Church of San Damiano, where, in a little while, the Lord, through His mercy and grace, made our number increase, so that He would fulfill what He had foretold through His saint."⁵⁶ It was the same Lord, then, Who wished that the sisters should remain permanently at San Damiano and not elsewhere.

26. Then Francis wrote the *Form of Life*, strongly insisting on poverty.⁵⁷ In order to assure fidelity to poverty, Clare asked of Innocent III

⁵⁴*TestCl* 9—17.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 19—22

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 30—31

and his successors the *Privilege of Poverty*. In clearly defining this poverty, Clare refers to the Virgin Mary, saying that by means of Francis, the Father has brought forth this little flock in the church so as to "follow the humility and poverty of His beloved Son and His glorious virgin mother."⁵⁸

The meaning of the way of life of Clare and the sisters is enunciated in solemn expressions in the *Testament*: "In the Lord Jesus Christ, I admonish and exhort all my sisters, both those present and those to come, to strive always to imitate the way of holy simplicity, humility and poverty, and [to preserve] the integrity of our holy way of living, as we were taught from the beginning of our conversion by Christ and our blessed father Francis."⁵⁹

Clare insists on the charity inherent in this holy conversion: "And loving one another with the charity of Christ, may the love you have in your hearts be shown outwardly in your deeds, so that, compelled by such an example, the sisters may always grow in love of God and in charity for one another."⁶⁰ This example of charity binds equally the sisters and the abbess. In fact, the abbess should give an example to the sisters so that:

... stimulated by her example, they obey her not so much because of her office as because of love. Let her also be discerning and attentive to her sisters as a good mother is to her daughters, and let her take care especially to provide for them according to the needs of each one out of the alms that the Lord shall give. Let her also be so kind and available that they may safely reveal their needs and confidently have recourse to her at any hour, as they see fit both for themselves and their sisters. Let the sisters who are subjects, however, keep in mind that they have given up their own wills for the sake of the Lord. Therefore, I want them to obey their mother of their own free will as they have promised the Lord, so that, seeing the charity, humility and unity they have toward one another, their mother might bear all the burdens of her office more easily, and, through their way of life, what is painful and bitter might be changed into sweetness..⁶¹

The use of the words 'bitter' and 'sweetness' bring to mind Francis's experience with the lepers. At first it was bitter; then it changed to sweetness of soul and body. It is really strange and significant that Clare should recall, in so different a context, this mystical sweetness experienced by Francis. Only here does she use these expressions. In

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 56—57.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 59—60.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 62—70.

conclusion, Clare summarizes the recurring inspirations of her entire life: the Lord, His mother Mary, Francis, the church. These are her motives for perseverance: "Let us be very careful, therefore, that, if we have set out on the path of the Lord, we do not at any time turn away from it through our own fault or negligence or ignorance, nor that we offend so great a Lord and His virgin mother, and our blessed father Francis, the church-triumphant and even the church-militant."⁶²

The Blessing

27. Clare's blessing confirms how "the handmaid of Christ" feels called to be mother to the sisters. It is also a motherly breath that touches the entire church both in heaven and on earth.

It is a document, perhaps unique in the history of Christianity, written by a woman, marked by an exceptional breadth of ecclesial sensitivity. It merits being quoted in its entirety.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19).

May the Lord bless you and keep you. May He show His face to you and be merciful to you. May He turn His countenance (Num. 6:24—26) to you, my sisters and daughters, and give peace to you, and to all others who come and remain in your company, as well as to others now and in the future, who have persevered in every other monastery of the Poor Ladies.

I, Clare, a servant of Christ, a little plant of our most holy father Francis, a sister and mother of you and the other poor sisters, although unworthy, beg our Lord Jesus Christ, through His mercy and the intercession of His most holy mother Mary and blessed Michael the Archangel and all the saints, that the heavenly Father give you and confirm for you this most holy blessing in heaven and on earth (Gen. 27:28). On earth, may He multiply you in His grace and His virtues among His servants and handmaids in His church-militant. In heaven, may He exalt you and glorify you among His men and women saints in His church-triumphant.

I bless you during my life and after my death, as I am able, out of all the blessings with which the Father of mercies had and does bless His sons and daughters in heaven and on earth (2 Cor. 1:3; Eph. 1:3), and a spiritual father and mother have blessed and bless their spiritual sons and daughters. Amen.

Always be lovers of your souls and those of your sisters. And may you always be eager to observe what you have promised the Lord.

May the Lord always be with you (2 Cor. 13:11; John 12:26; 1 Thess. 4:17) and may you always be with Him. Amen.⁶³

⁶²Ibid., 74—75.

⁶³BenCl 1—6.

The Form of Life

28. Unquestionably the *Form of Life* that Clare received from Francis in the beginning (1212—13) is the basic guide to understanding her plan. Clare keeps this, at least in its essential core, in chapter six of the approved *Rule* of 1253.

Clare tells how, shortly after her conversion, Francis gave the *Form of Life* to her or her first companions, and how they promised to obey him.

Observing with great joy how happy Clare and the sisters were in the midst of so many difficulties, how alien to the world, how poor and dedicated to work just as his brothers were, Francis wanted to write a *Form of Life* for them.

Differing from Francis, Clare never uses the word *Rule*; she prefers *Form of Life* and *Form of Living*. She will use this expression twenty-one times.

The tenor of this *Form of Life* is entirely Marian, in a Trinitarian dimension. The *Form of Life* is destined for the daughters and handmaids of the Father, spouses of the Holy Spirit. They have chosen the way of Gospel perfection, that is, the following of the Lord and His mother, as is explicitly stated in her *Last Will*, which is inserted here verbatim: "By divine inspiration you have made yourselves daughters and handmaids of the most high king, the heavenly Father, and have taken the Holy Spirit as your spouse, choosing to live according to the perfection of the holy Gospel."⁶⁴

It is because of this choice that Francis takes it upon himself to have the same concern for Clare and the sisters as he wishes to have for his brothers: "I resolve and promise for myself and for my brothers to always have that same loving care and solicitude for you as [I have] for them" (*RCl VI 4*).

It is the same Trinitarian-Marian life that Francis proposes at that same time (1212—15) with his *Letters to the Faithful*, addressed to all the penitents throughout the world. It is precisely here that he says that every faithful soul, assimilating the Word of God, personally participates in the filial, espoused, fraternal and motherly life of Mary in the Spirit of the Lord.⁶⁵ All true penitents or faithful ones, in fact, in as far as they live the word of God, according to Luke 8:19—21, are through the Spirit of the Lord made children of the Father, spouses of

⁶⁴*RCl VI 3*.

⁶⁵See *1EpFid I 8—10*; *2EpFid 50—53*.

the Holy Spirit, brothers and mothers of the Lord, Jesus Christ. In sum, this is the Trinitarian life of Mary.

The text even draws to attention the Antiphon of the *Office of the Passion*, in which almost the same words occur, referring, naturally, to the Blessed Virgin: "You are the daughter and servant of the most high and supreme King and Father of heaven; you are the mother of our most holy Lord Jesus Christ; you are the spouse of the Holy Spirit."⁶⁶

Can one speak of a total novelty? Medieval society was saturated with debates on the evangelical-apostolic life, held in the most varied and not always orthodox manner. The novelty lies in that two "new" people like Clare and Francis, renewed in the Spirit, knew how to make that Gospel ideal penetrate outside the ordinary feudal clerical and monastic classes and into the masses of the common people.

The Last Will

29. In the "*Last Will*," Francis, with precise reference to its Marian overtones, gives to Clare the ratification of the *Form of Life* she has chosen. "I, little brother Francis, wish to follow the life and poverty of our most high Lord Jesus Christ, and of His holy mother, and to persevere in this until the end; and I ask and counsel you, my ladies, to live always in this most holy life and poverty. And keep most careful watch that you never depart from this by reason of the teaching or advice of anyone."⁶⁷

Letters to St. Agnes of Prague

30. It is clear, therefore, that the "way" for Clare and the sisters consists in permitting Christ, in the Holy Spirit, to live in them as in Mary.

This same idea is found in her *Third Letter to St. Agnes of Prague*, when she refers to the Letter to the Penitents or to the Faithful. She speaks of the beloved spouse of God-made-man. She must mirror herself in the divine-human person of the crucified but gloriously risen Lord. Totally transformed into the object of her love, she must become the support of the weak members of His ineffable body. Therefore, she adds: "[Thus you can] without any doubt always carry Him ... holding Him by Whom all things are held together (Wis. 1:7), possessing that which, in comparison with the other transitory possessions of this world, you will possess more securely."⁶⁸

⁶⁶ *OffPass.*

⁶⁷ *RCI VI 7—9.*

⁶⁸ *3LAg 25—26.*

The Privilege of Poverty

31. Special attention must be given the *Privilege of Poverty*, which Clare asked of Innocent III already in 1216. The text gives a synthesis of the spirituality of Francis and Clare which, up till now, has never been surpassed, and which is due to Clare herself. It is based on synoptic, Pauline, Petrine, and Johannine references, and it breathes the nuptial atmosphere of the Song of Solomon.

As is evident, you have renounced the desire for all temporal things, desiring to dedicate yourselves to the Lord alone. Because of this, since you have sold all things and given them to the poor (Luke 18:22), you propose not to have any possessions whatsoever, clinging in all things to the footprints of Him, the way the truth, and the life (John 14:6), Who for our sake was made poor. Nor does a lack of possessions frighten you from a proposal of this sort; for the left hand of the heavenly Spouse is under your head (Song of Sol. 2:6) to support the weakness of your body, which you have placed under the law of your soul through an ordered charity. Finally, He Who feeds the birds of the heavens (Matt. 6:26) and clothes the lilies of the field (Matt. 6:28) will not fail you in either food or clothing, until He ministers to you in heaven, when His right hand especially will more happily embrace you (Song. of Sol. 8:3) in the fullness of His sight. Therefore, we confirm with our apostolic authority, as you requested, your proposal of most high poverty (2 Cor. 8:2), granting you by the authority of [these] present that no one can compel you to receive possessions. Therefore, let no one be permitted to tamper with this document of our concession or dare to oppose it with rash temerity.⁶⁹

The Rule

32. Although the approved *Rule* was written towards the end of Clare's life (after the *Testament*, or in the same period of time), it nevertheless offers valuable autobiographical data about her evangelical life, as well as other important data. In the Prologue, where the pope and Cardinal Raynaldo speak, we undoubtedly find the same ideas contained in the plea which Clare must have submitted for approval. In agreement with the pope, the cardinal expressly says that this *Form of Life*, according to which Clare and the sisters must live "in a manner of holy unity and greatest poverty," had been given to them in word and in writing by Francis. The cardinal, calling Clare "daughter and dearest mother" further specifies that the sisters intend to follow in the footsteps of Christ and His most holy mother. They have chosen to live a cloistered life "in bodily enclosure" and to serve the Lord in highest poverty "with a free spirit."

⁶⁹*PrivPo* 2—8.

This, therefore, is the *Rule* in its essentials: "to observe the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, living in obedience, without owning anything, and in chastity."

The life of the sisters, marked by unity of soul, mutual charity and highest poverty, is based on the co-responsibility of all the sisters working for the common good.⁷⁰ The candidates must be carefully "informed" about the way of life they will profess.⁷¹ The abbess, or mother, elected canonically for the common good⁷² (contrary to the custom of even electing non-professed), must be a professed sister, exemplary, and open to dialogue.⁷³ To maintain unity and peace, let the superiors of the monasteries be elected with the consent of all the members.⁷⁴ The abbess should always be guided by the advice of the discreet (or councillors).⁷⁵ This idea of "discreets" is a novelty introduced by Clare.

33. After chapter 5, which speaks of silence, the grill, and other fine points, Clare almost haphazardly introduces five other chapters (6—10) of an entirely different tone, even interrupting the subject of the enclosure, which will be taken up again in chapter 9. It is a sudden interruption, contrary to every internal law of drawing up a *Rule*. It is evident that one is dealing with five chapters that Clare holds particularly dear to her heart. Above all, being the woman of tenacity and sureness of self that she is, Clare intends to insist firmly on them as being characteristic and unchangeable since they are evangelical-Franciscan ideals.

We have already spoken of chapter 6 as of that which contains the moving account of her spiritual journey inspired by the *Form of Life* and the *Last Will* of Francis. In it we find a hint of the poverty to be observed till the end. Nevertheless, it agrees that a little piece of land may be used, sufficient for a garden for the sustenance of the sisters and the enclosure of the monastery.

Chapter 7 takes up again a theme that is of vital importance to Francis: priority to be given to the spirit of prayer and devotion, which should serve all things temporal; material and spiritual works, study, works of charity, devotions, and works of penance. In fact, the grace of work is a gift, an inspiration from the Lord. It excludes idleness, the

⁷⁰RCI II 1.

⁷¹Ibid., 19—20.

⁷²Ibid., IV 3.

⁷³Ibid., 4—18.

⁷⁴Ibid., 22.

⁷⁵Ibid., 23.

enemy of the soul. Of itself it does not extinguish the spirit of prayer and devotion, but rather should serve and strengthen it. It is always the Spirit of the Lord that gives life to every good work, be it prayer, work, or any other temporal human activity. Consequently, if work (yet another activity which could of itself be a prayer) is not performed under the inspiration of the Lord but from self-love or selfish motives, it would not be of the Spirit Who gives life, but of the letter of the law which kills.⁷⁶

This idea of the life-giving Spirit returns in chapter 10. Here Clare follows the *Rule* of Francis, but she deepens its central core. It concerns the struggle between the flesh and the spirit. The spirit of the flesh, or self-love, is the enemy of true love of God and of neighbor. Its opposite is the love of the Spirit of the Lord, which permits us to pray always with a pure heart and to live in humility and patience and to love even those who persecute us. Let's listen to Clare:

In fact, I admonish and exhort the sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ to beware of all pride, vainglory, envy, avarice, care and anxiety about this world, detraction and murmuring, dissension and division. Let them be always eager to preserve among themselves the unity of mutual love, which is the bond of perfection. 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 else: the Spirit of the Lord and His holy manner of working, to pray always to Him with a pure heart, and to have humility, patience in difficulty and infirmity, and to love those who persecute, blame, and accuse us, for the Lord says: "Blessed are those who suffer persecution for the sake of justice, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:10). But whoever perseveres to the end will be saved."⁷⁷

34. It is, therefore, the only and same Spirit of the Lord that operates in a holy manner in prayer and mutual love, and which leads to perseverance and final salvation.

In order to garner Clare's original creativity we must underline those "additions" that she makes to the simple words of Francis, that is, the Pauline references to evangelical perfection: "Above all else have charity, which is the bond of perfection" (Col. 3:14), and "Seek to preserve unity of spirit in the bonds of peace" (Eph. 4:3). Clare refers to Galatians 4:14—21 when she speaks of dissension and division. Paul is of great use to Clare to explain what she means by "the Spirit of the Lord above everything desirable," of which Francis speaks. It is the Spirit of the Lord in person Who works in us in a holy manner in the unity of mutual love, making us pray always with a pure heart. And it is still

⁷⁶See *Adm* VII and XIV.

⁷⁷*RCI* X 6—13. Cf. *RegB* X 7—8; *Adm* I 1.

the Spirit of the Lord that makes us participate in His life and in that of His mother. In this evangelical-Trinitarian-Marian life Clare places the exemplary references for her journey of perfection. She looks at Mary, hidden and silent at Nazareth, spouse of the Holy Spirit, mother of Christ, the Virgin-made-church, and us in her.⁷⁸ And although Clare does not greatly delineate this life of contemplative prayer in enclosure, it is certain that her choice of a Marian life strongly suggests the full experience of God in the intimate life of the Trinity. It is a life shared with the Lord and His mother in the Holy Spirit to the point of mysticism, as the writings of Clare and of Francis and the rich tradition of Clare prove.

35. A testimony of Thomas of Celano leads us to an understanding of this tradition of the life of Clare:

The virtue of a continuous and mutual charity dominates everything else among them. It so deeply unites their wills that even in a community of forty or fifty members, as is found in some places, the identity of will or non-will makes of them just one soul. Secondly there is humility. Thirdly, virginity, which brings forth in their souls so much love of their eternal Spouse. In the fourth place is their most holy poverty. Fifth is the grace of mortification and of silence. In the sixth place is patience, so that no trial and vexation can either break the spirit or change it. In the seventh place is the height of contemplation, which is the joy of being in intimacy with God.⁷⁹

As we see, Celano comments on Clare's *Rule* as a hierarchy of virtues, as he does for the first fraternity of the Friars Minor, which is built on the foundation of humility in the Holy Spirit.⁸⁰ He adds: "They were so full of holy simplicity, of innocence, of purity of heart as to ignore every dissimulation. As unusual as was their faith, so also reigned in them unity of souls, harmony of intention and of customs, the same charity, the practice of virtue, pious acts and harmony of minds."⁸¹

36. We all know how during the course of the centuries this absolute priority of charity was rather obscured because of discord and of divisions, even in the Order of St. Clare. This was due to motives, more or less related to the interpretation of the laws of enclosure, the practice of prayer, fasts and abstinence, dress, and so forth, often forgetting that only the Spirit of the Lord gives life and meaning to enclosure, poverty, unity and penance. Francis, too, in *Admonition XIV* affirms the beati-

⁷⁸ *SalBVM* 1—6.

⁷⁹ *ICel* 19—20.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 38—39.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

tude: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven":

There are many who, applying themselves insistently to prayers and good deeds, engage in much abstinence and many mortifications of their bodies, but they are scandalized and quickly roused to anger by a single word which seems injurious to their person, or by some other things which might be taken from them. These [persons] are not poor in spirit, because a person who is truly poor in spirit hates himself (Luke 14:26) and loves those who strike him on the cheek (Matt. 5:39).⁸²

The only truly decisive criteria of the love of God and of neighbor and of true loving obedience is a merciful love like that of God the Father. Such a love is better than the life of a hermit, as Francis said to a minister who, tired of the problems his brothers caused him, would have wished to retire to a hermitage.⁸³

37. It is well to recall here another evil that Francis and Clare strongly condemn as being "odious" to God, that is, the sin of detraction and murmuring, of calumny brought about by envy and vain glory. This sin is directly opposed to the Spirit of the Lord and of unity in mutual charity. Francis considered it the "ruin of a religious order."⁸⁴ Our multiform Franciscan family has had sad experience of this. Too often we are divided and separated simply by reciprocal negative judgments about problems, so often secondary and accidental. Modeled, therefore, on the life of the Trinity: "Let us be as one."⁸⁵ Let us sincerely pledge ourselves anew to true unity in the richness of the multiplicity of ways to bring about the actualization of our basic plan (way of life).

In chapter 8, Clare literally recaptures the theme of highest poverty of chapter 6 of the *Later Rule* of Francis. She nevertheless adds reference to the poverty of the mother of the Lord and adopts the style to one of feminine sensitivity. Noteworthy is the attention given to the needs of the sisters, which is a sign of faith in the personal maturity of each one.

38. It is significant that both Francis and Clare should put highest poverty and fraternal charity in one sole chapter. To follow the Lord and His mother leads to the constitution of a "new" family of "spiritual" sisters, as Clare intends — without owning anything under heaven, the Lord and His mother Mary being their only treasure. They are founded on the Spirit. Their only father is the heavenly One, and their only mother is Mary, whose maternity in the Spirit they mutually share.

⁸² *Adm* XIV.

⁸³ *EpMin* 1—22.

⁸⁴ See *2Cel* 182.

⁸⁵ *John* 17; *1EpFid* I 1—19; *2EpFid* 45—61; *RegNB* XII 41—55.

Chapter 9 deals with penance which is obligatory for all grave sins, even if taken in a context of mercy. The sisters are exhorted not to be irritated or disturbed over the sins of anyone. This would be against fraternal charity. If anyone has given scandal or grieved anyone, she should first humbly ask pardon and then go and pray to the Lord. They should then forgive each other in order to obtain God's mercy.

In chapter 12, Clare asks spiritual and material assistance from the brothers, who should be discreet and love honesty and holy conversation. Finally, she asks the Holy Roman Church to give them a protector, so that they may always remain faithful to the church and there faithfully follow the Gospel, which they have promised to observe.

Cantic of Exhortation to St. Clare and Her Sisters

39. This is a confirmation of the love Francis bequeathed to Clare and the sisters, a testament in song-form, which he left to the sisters before his death.

At the same time and in the same place where Francis had composed the *Praises of the Lord Through His Creatures*, he also wrote some words to music, in great part to console the Poor Ladies of San Damiano, especially because he knew how greatly they grieved over his illness. And since he could not visit them personally because of his illness, he wanted his companions to take this song to them and have them listen to it. In it, Francis wanted to show to the sisters, for the present and for all time, what his ideal was, that is, that they be of one heart in charity and fraternal community life, because when the brothers were still few in number they became converted to Christ through his example and advice. Their conversion and holy conversation is a glory and edification not only to the Order of Brothers, of whom they are the little plant, but also of the entire church of God.

Therefore, knowing that from the beginning, either through their own will or of necessity, they had led and were living a hard life, his heart was moved with feelings of piety and love toward them. In this song he pleads with them, that since from the moment the Lord had brought them together from various places to live a life of holy charity, poverty, and obedience, they should continue to live and to die in these virtues.

He especially advised them to use the alms which the Lord sent them to provide for their bodily needs with wise discretion, joy, and gratitude. He also counseled that the sisters bear with patience their work of caring for the sick, and that they be patient in the infirmities and privations which they suffered.⁸⁶

40. In this text marked by such tenderness, there is more than an echo of what Francis had said even to his brothers who assisted him during his long illness:

⁸⁶LP 45.

Dearest brothers and my children, do not go to any trouble and grief in caring for me in this illness. The Lord will reward, in this world and in the next, the fruit of the weariness you have endured for me, His servant. He will reimburse you for all you have given up to take care of me. Furthermore, for this service you render to me, you will receive a recompense greater than that given to the one who pledges himself for the good of the entire order. You tell me: "We are spending so much for you: but in your place God will be our debtor." It was thus that the saintly father spoke in order to encourage and spur on the weariness and weakness of spirit of his companions, so that, tried by their tiredness they might not say: "Here we are, unable either to pray any more or to bear this burden" ... lest overcome with discouragement and weariness they lose the reward of their labor.⁸⁷

Clare: A Faithful Woman

41. A title which certainly fits Clare is that of "faithful virgin." Up until the end she remains faithful to the Father, to the crucified Lord, to the Blessed Virgin Mary, to the church, to Francis, to the entire Franciscan family, to each of her sisters, to her city, Assisi, to the whole of humanity. One might add — to the entire world.

The meaning of the words 'faith', 'fidelity', or 'faithful', be it for Clare or for Francis, is more adequately expressed by 'a faithful soul' (heart) or, as Clare notes, 'the soul (heart) of the faithful person.' Once again this richness lies in participation in the life of the Trinity. It is the participation of a child, a spouse. It is fraternal and maternal or Marian. The perfect Gospel life is, in fact, this intimate and personal communion with the divine persons. Francis and Clare are witnesses of that ineffable sweetness that God gives to those who are disposed to love "totally Him Who gave Himself totally for your love."⁸⁸ Of these, Francis says: "Therefore, hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves, so that He Who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally."⁸⁹

Concern for Human Weakness

42. In Clare's writings we note a constant concern for human weakness, both within and outside the walls of San Damiano. In fact, although freely chosen and lived with joy, the life of the sisters and of the brothers themselves was difficult. It is understandable how, especially with the brothers, the temptation to ask for mitigations and dispensations could insinuate itself. The popes themselves would have

⁸⁷ Ibid., 47.

⁸⁸ 3LA 15.

⁸⁹ EpOrd 29.

wanted to mitigate the rule of highest poverty. Hence Clare's active and passive resistance, even from her deathbed, her insisting on "not giving in," on "holding fast to what we promised," her strong struggle to have and to defend the *Privilege of Poverty*. Her personal success in adhering to this fidelity to an extremely arduous cause stands out more if we consider how, after her death, her *Rule* was abandoned, and not only by those who preferred that of Urban IV, but even by those Poor Ladies who formally wished to follow it. In Clare, the so-called weaker sex prevailed over that (sex) considered strong. She revealed herself the "valiant woman" who deserves to be compared to Mary beneath the cross, as we find in the *Process*.

As if to balance Clare's close concern for fidelity, in her writings we find the keen affirmation of the primacy of holy unity in mutual charity. Clare knows well that without this charity, poverty itself becomes impossible. This is shown by a history of divisions lasting several centuries. Not infrequently we even find foundations of new monasteries that originated by reason of dissension rather than from constructive motives. We cannot forget the strong admonition of the *Privilege of Poverty* of Innocent III in 1216: "And if any woman does not wish to, or cannot observe a proposal of this sort, let her not have a dwelling place among you...." The sad conclusion ends with a wish of peace: "May the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ,... be with all of you and with those who, in this same place, preserve a love of Christ."⁹⁰

"Follow the Counsel of Our Minister General"

43. The pleas of the *Rule* to preserve the unity of mutual love and peace⁹¹ are urgent: "Let them be always eager to preserve among themselves the unity of mutual love, which is the bond of perfection."⁹² Like Francis, Clare understood that discord is the victory of the flesh over the spirit in its fruits of pride, vainglory, envy, murmuring, detraction, and calumny. These are fruits of the spirit that arise from the heart of one who is carnal.

The *Second Letter to St. Agnes of Prague* is another document of Clare's fidelity. This letter, written to sustain her great friend in her struggle to defend poverty, which the highest church authorities considered to be unreasonable and impossible, merits careful reading.

I give thanks to the giver of grace from Whom, we believe, every good and perfect gift proceeds (James 1:17), because He has adorned you with such

⁹⁰*PrivPov* 8, 11.

⁹¹*RegCl* IV 22.

⁹²*Ibid.*, X 7.

splendors of virtue and illuminated you with such marks of perfection, that, since you have become such a diligent imitator of the Father of all perfection (Matt. 5:48), you might be made perfect and His eyes do not see anything imperfect in you.

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

But because one thing is necessary (Luke 10:42), I bear witness to that one thing and encourage you, for love of Him to whom you have offered yourself as a holy and pleasing sacrifice (Rom. 12:1), that, like another Rachel (Gen. 29:16), you always remember your resolution and be conscience of your beginning.

What you hold, may you [always] hold. What you do, may you [always] do and never abandon. But with swift pace, light step, unswerving feet, so that even your steps stir up no dust, may you go forward securely, joyfully, and swiftly, on the path of prudent happiness, not believing anything, not agreeing with anything, that would dissuade you from this resolution or that would place a stumbling block for you on the way, so that you may offer your vows to the Most High in the pursuit of that perfection to which the Spirit of the Lord has called you.

In all of this, follow the counsel of our venerable father, our Brother Elias, the minister general, that you may walk more securely in the way of the commands of the Lord (Ps. 118:32). Prize it beyond the advice of the others, and cherish it as dearer to you than any gift. 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,⁹³ do not follow his counsel. But as a poor virgin, embrace the poor Christ.

"We Are the Mirror"

44. Reference to the *Last Will* and to the pressures of Pope Gregory IX is very singular. Clare definitely points to the poor Christ of Whom Agnes wishes to be the spouse, and Whose sorrowful beauty she describes at the moment of His passion, to which heavenly glory is joined:

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]. If you suffer with Him, you will reign with Him

⁹³2LAg 3—7, 10—13.

(Rom. 8:17). [If you] weep [with Him], you shall rejoice with Him. [If you] die with Him on the cross of tribulation (2 Tim. 2:12), you shall possess heavenly mansions in the splendor of the saints (Ps. 109:3), and in the Book of Life your name shall be called glorious among men (Phil. 4:3; Rev. 3:5).⁹⁴

45. We even find a consistent incentive to fidelity in some fragments of the *Letter to Ermentrude of Bruges*:

Be faithful, dearly beloved, till death to Him to Whom you have promised yourself, for you shall be crowned by Him with the garland of life (Job 1:12). Our labor here is brief, the reward eternal. May the excitements of the world, fleeing like a shadow (Wis. 10:17; Eccl. 18:22; Job 14:2) not disturb you. May the false delights of the deceptive world not deceive you. Close your ears to the whisperings of hell and bravely oppose its onslaughts. Gladly endure whatever goes against you and do not let your good fortunes lift you up, for these things destroy faith and those demand it. Offer faithfully what you have vowed to God and He shall reward you (Ps. 75:12). Look to heaven that invites us, O dearly beloved, and take up the cross and follow Christ Who goes before us (Luke 9:23), for through Him we shall enter into His glory after many different trials (Acts 14:22; Luke 24:26). Love God and Jesus, His Son, Who was crucified for us sinners, from the depths of your heart, and never let the thought of Him leave your mind (Deut. 6:5; 11:1; Luke 10:27; 1 Cor. 16:22). Meditate constantly on the mysteries of the cross and the agonies of His mother standing at the foot of the cross (John 19:25). Pray always and be vigilant (Matt. 26:41). The work you have begun well, complete immediately, and the ministry you have assumed, fulfill in holy poverty and sincere humility. Do not be afraid, daughter. God, Who is faithful in all His words and holy in all His deeds, will pour His blessings upon you and your sisters. He will be your helper and the best consoler. He is our redeemer and our eternal reward. Let us pray to God for one another, for by carrying each other's burden of charity in this way we will easily fulfill the law of Christ.⁹⁵

Clare's strong will to remain radically faithful to God, to Christ, to the church, to Francis, to the sisters, to humanity, shows forth more decisively in her *Testament*, even from the preamble: "There is our vocation, for which, all the more by way of its being more perfect and greater, do we owe the greatest thanks to Him."⁹⁶ Let us cite the more characteristic steps.

With what eagerness and fervor of mind and body, therefore, must we keep the commandments of our God and Father, so that, with the help of the Lord, we may return to Him an increase of His talent (Matt. 25:15—23). For the Lord Himself has placed us not only as a form for others in being an example and mirror, but even for our sisters whom the Lord has

⁹⁴Ibid., 19—22. Cf. Isaiah 53:2—4.

⁹⁵LEr 4—17.

⁹⁶TestCl 3.

called to our way of life as well, that they in turn might be a mirror and example to those living in the world. Since the Lord has called us to such great things that those who are to be a mirror and example to others may be reflected in us, we are greatly bound to bless and praise God and be all the more strengthened to do good in the Lord.⁹⁷

"Christ Will Give Us Perseverance"

46. For such fidelity to poverty Clare makes reference to "the Son of God, [Who] never wished to abandon this holy poverty while He lived in the world,"⁹⁸ and to Francis, who, "having imitated His footprints, never departed either in example or in teaching from this holy poverty that he had chosen for himself and his brothers."⁹⁹

Still stronger is the declaration of Clare's own will: "Therefore, I, Clare, a handmaid... although unworthy ... as I have always been most zealous and solicitous to observe and to have the others observe the holy poverty that we have promised to the Lord and our holy father Francis, so, too, the others who will succeed me in office should always be bound to observe holy poverty."¹⁰⁰

Nevertheless, fidelity does not pertain only to poverty. Clare admonished and exhorts the sisters, present and those to come: "to strive always to imitate the way of holy simplicity, humility and poverty and [to preserve] the integrity of our holy way of living, as we were taught from the beginning of our conversion by Christ and our blessed father Francis."¹⁰¹

The conclusion of the *Testament* is an exhortation to this total and vibrant fidelity:

And because the way and path is difficult and the gate through which one passes and enters to life is narrow, there are both few who walk it and enter through it (Matt. 7—14). And if there are some who walk that way for a while, there are very few who persevere on it. But how blessed are those to whom it has been given to walk that way and to persevere till the end (Ps. 118:1; Matt. 10:22). Let us be very careful, therefore, that if we have set out on the path of the Lord, we do not at any time turn away from it through our own fault or negligence or ignorance, nor that we offend so great a Lord and His virgin mother, and our blessed father Francis, the church-triumphant and even the church-militant. For it is written: "Those who turn away from your commands are cursed" (Ps. 118:21). For this reason I bend my knee to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Eph 3:14) that, through the supporting merits of the glorious and holy virgin Mary,

⁹⁷Ibid., 18—22.

⁹⁸Ibid., 35.

⁹⁹Ibid., 36.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 37, 40—41.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 56—57.

His mother, and of our most blessed father Francis and all the saints, the Lord Himself, Who has given a good beginning, will also give the increase and final perseverance (2 Cor. 8:6, 11). Amen.¹⁰²

Faithful to Clare in Our Times

48. The celebration of Clare's eighth centenary can have no other purpose than to give to the church and to the world today an ever more living image of Clare as an example and mirror of those values that rise to the Most High and of whose need and desire we are aware. Naturally this image of Clare can be relived especially in her daughters and sisters spread over all continents. It is on her daughters that lies the happy and compelling burden of that conversion and continual formation based on the example of Clare — untiring up to the last in her journey toward evangelical perfection — and which, by the indications of the signs of our times, can make the way of Clare a drawing force even today.

This formation is like an obligation of fidelity to identity in our times. Naturally one starts with the *Rule*, which recalls to mind the choice of the sisters who should form others "diligently in a holy way of life and proper behavior according to the form of our profession."¹⁰³ A guarantee of the best way to proceed in the election of the abbess (the first one responsible for formation) seems to be offered from their communion with the brothers: "In the election of the abbess they should quickly arrange to have the minister general or the minister provincial of the Order of Friars Minor present. Let him dispose them, through the Word of God, to perfect harmony and the common good in the election that is to be held."¹⁰⁴

Clare held very much at heart the word of God as an instrument of formation. This is shown even in her concern for having preachers who were well instructed and capable. Clare really "tasted" the word of God. It is noteworthy to relate that during a sermon given by Filippo Longo, well versed in Sacred Scripture, the Lord Jesus Christ appeared to Clare in the form of "a very handsome young boy." It seemed to signify that the word of God, listened to carefully, makes the Lord almost be reborn in us under the action of the Holy Spirit: "I am in their midst" (Matt. 8:20), signifying through these words the young boy Jesus Christ, Who stood in the midst of the preachers and listeners when they were preaching and listening as they should."¹⁰⁵ It seems very definitely

¹⁰²Ibid., 71—78.

¹⁰³*RCI* II 19—20.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., IV 1—3.

that Clare would have threatened a hunger strike if she were ever denied good preachers. "Once when Lord Pope Gregory forbade any brother to go to the monasteries of the Ladies without permission, the pious mother, sorrowing that her sisters would more rarely have the food of sacred teaching, sighed: 'Let him now take away from us all the brothers, since he has taken away those who provide us with food that is vital.'"¹⁰⁶

49. Aware of the fact that materialism is the enemy of serious formation, Clare, convinced of the irreplaceable role of the abbess, strongly exacted co-responsibility from all the sisters, including fostering the personal growth of the individual. For the rest, she herself had always given the example of a spirit of service which brought to mind the humility and motherliness of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Clare's concern seems to be for a truly fraternal community, open and all-inclusive towards those sisters who were psychologically or spiritually weak and who should not want for anything, even in that primitive community.

It Is the Spirit Who Gives Life

50. Today it is entirely unrealistic to propose how much Clare and her sisters have left us as a material or literary inheritance. A letter or a norm, relevant and ideal in a determined historical milieu, will always be referred back to that Spirit of the Lord Who had suggested it at that time, in order to understand how it might be acceptable today. Regarding this, Clare's and Francis's unequivocal thinking is: "God is Spirit; ... It is the Spirit that gives life."¹⁰⁷ "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."¹⁰⁸ "[My words] are spirit and life."¹⁰⁹ "By divine inspiration [that is, inspired by the Spirit], you have made yourselves daughters and servants of the most high King."¹¹⁰

In the Unity of the Franciscan Family

51. The fundamental unity of the Franciscan family should be the key criterion of formation and inter-Franciscan collaboration. Francis and his brothers recognized their own life-style in the life of Clare and the sisters, since all had decided to live according to the Gospel, follow-

¹⁰⁵ *Proc X 8*

¹⁰⁶ *LegCl 37.*

¹⁰⁷ *Adm I 5-6.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid., VII 1.*

¹⁰⁹ *1EpFid II 21; 2EpFid 86 (bis).*

¹¹⁰ *RCI VI 3.*

ing the Lord and His mother, participating in the life of the Trinity as children of the Father, spouses of the Spirit, brothers and sisters and mothers of the Lord. This Trinitarian life, well portrayed in the *Letters to the Faithful*, is also seen in their full participation in the way of perfection with all lay penitents who intended to follow Francis. Consequently, on this unique evangelical life in which all participate is based the unity of the pluriform Franciscan family. It has evolved in a wonderful variety of directions and subdivisions. In this context, special and concrete attention is given to development of a more intense mutual relationship among the Friars Minor and the sisters of St. Clare.

What a joy it will be for the sisters to seek as much help as possible in spiritual formation from the Friars Minor, the federations, novitiates in common, assemblies, and so forth — not a fatherly protection on the part of the brothers, but a mutual service in a true spirit of littleness and brotherliness that is mutually enriching. On the part of the brothers, the duty to promote vocations to the Poor Ladies should be serious, committed, and articulate. This is true both in a specific sense and in the sense of contributions to the ongoing advancement of women, consistent with Clare's testimony at her time on this subject, which is so vibrant today. And why not strengthen the educational and even developmental relations of the sisters toward the brothers, as Francis himself used to do from the beginning of his evangelical vocation?¹¹¹

The Spirit and the Life of Prayer

52. Chapter 7 of Clare's *Rule*, and chapter 5 of the *Later Rule* of Francis, demand absolute priority of the spirit of prayer over all other things that take place in a concrete human life. Such is the requirement of a truly pledged Christian life. It is especially so of a contemplative life as a state of consecration to God Who is love, with Whom contemplatives are always more deeply in love, since, in Mother-Church, they are love. In fact, the Spirit must have free room to inspire, animate, give life to all that one does: from prayer to work, to study, to all kinds of activities. In this way, life truly becomes a holy work of the Spirit. All opposition between work and prayer having been overcome, everything will be done faithfully and devotedly, in full unity of life around the one thing necessary and absolute, which is God.

For Clare, fraternal charity is simultaneously the criterion of and the premise to prayer. It is significant that chapter 9 insists that a sister who has failed against charity must ask pardon and be reconciled

¹¹¹LM XII 2.

before going to prayer. Charity is "above all things," as mentioned before: above prayer, silence, material poverty, penance, enclosure. On these convictions the sisters must be formed in all phases of their formative journey, holding themselves co-responsible and open even to personal initiatives.

With the Strength and the Tenderness of the Temperament of Clare

53. The Magna Carta of formation, however, is found in chapter 10 of the *Rule*. Here Clare presents the divine formation master of souls: the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is He Himself in person Who in a holy manner works or forms in us His life of poverty, humility and crucifixion to the point of the Trinitarian unity of mutual love — the bond of perfection, culminating in love of enemies whether near and far. This formation in the Spirit becomes in us Spirit and life in the Lord in the measure that we mortify our self-love: pride, vainglory, envy, detraction, murmuring, calumny, division, discord, and so forth (Gal. 5). Clare, deepening still more the text of *Later Rule* (chap. 10) reveals her inner and radical intention of describing the profile of a sister of a strong and deeply spiritual temperament. She should be a sister intimately united to the Spirit of the Lord, and courageous in bearing even the harsh trials of our human journey through life that are brought about by the incidents of life and by other people, including brothers and sisters.

The stress of the formation of a strong and courageous temperament does not at all dispense from even constant daily encounters with the weak and the sick. The formative task therefore, will be that of formation of self and of growing towards strength together with gentleness, especially toward the most weak. Clare reveals herself master in this. What she had requested already in chapter 8 for the sick sisters is basic: "Concerning the sick sisters, let the abbess be strictly bound to inquire diligently, by herself and through other sisters, what their illness requires both by way of counsel as well as food and other necessities. Let her provide for them charitably and kindly according to the resources of the place. [Let this be done] because all are bound to serve and provide for their sisters who are ill just as they would wish to be served themselves if they were suffering from any illness."¹¹²

If one thinks of the medieval world, often marked by lack of daily bread, frequent disasters, and the spread of disease, one appreciates all the more Clare's tenderness, realistically alert to the most basic needs,

¹¹²RCI VIII 12—14.

as a good mother would be for her smallest children. How much more, looking at the example of Mary, would not a mother in the Spirit do? An abstract love, even if supernatural and heroic, does not suffice. Love must have a concerned interest for the material needs of the sisters. It is necessary to know how to love and to nourish.

With the Wisdom of the Heart

54. Every formative task tends especially toward formation of the heart, that is, of the inner depths of the person, where the soul draws from the Spirit and life of the Lord the meaning and strength of charity, prayer, obedience, poverty, penance, chastity, and so forth. In this manner one avoids the risk of observances being the fruit of fear rather than of love, that is, of a human respect, which is totally egotistic, rather than a gratuitous pure love that springs from an undivided heart.

In the Mystery of the Cloister

55. The undivided heart has its milieu of self-development and growth in the grace of the enclosure. Clare, in fact, so as to live her personal espoused love of Christ in the inner recesses of her heart and to remain faithful to it, always enclosed herself in solitude: in silent, poor, penitential withdrawal. Here, like Mary, she carried in her maternal heart the entire church. She was cloistered inasmuch as it was necessary to "live the Lord" better and more intensely and intimately. Clare's cloistered life brings to mind that mystical place of which she speaks in her letter to Agnes, already spoken of.¹¹³ Seen in this light, enclosure, clearly personalized in the Marian sense, avoids the risk of a restricted, rigid and material concept. This interpretation would misconstrue Clare's real nature and intentions. The consequences of this misconception would be that even within a life literally cloistered, hearts would be divided by lesser and greater passions that impoverish the real life of prayer and devotion. Mutual charity would be destroyed. The enclosure would be peopled with hearts wandering outside the cloister while the body remains inside, sheltered only by the letter of the law.

In the Ancient Freshness of the Rule

56. All Poor Sisters throughout the world desire the strongest commitment to Clare. A qualifying sign of such a desire is the widespread hope of returning to the *Form of Life of the Rule of 1253*. By now the

¹¹³3LAg 13—19; see paragraph no. 1 of this letter (above).

branches of the family of Poor Clares know how to face with intelligence and detachment the reasons which, in their time, provoked divisions and influences of distance even as regards the *Rule*. This return — not to the letter but to the spirit which gives life — must not in any way mean the end of pluralism of forms and reforms which make up the richness of Clare's ideal. The deep changes of time, the differences of cultures and of places require a sane and decisive renewal in that diversity of forms which gives witness to the one Spirit that operates in all (1 Cor. 12).

A fundamental path of unity in a sane and holy pluralism in essential points is found in the new *Constitutions* approved by the Holy See. Their sincere and generous observance guarantees the primary fidelity to the *Form of Life* or *Rule* inherited from Clare.

For the rest, Clare has shown, already in the span of her time, such a keen richness of discernment of situations and people as to authorize revisions even to the norm of poverty, so dear to her, by agreeing, for example, to own a little piece of land, to mark off a certain neutral zone between the monastery and the world.¹¹⁴ As regards enclosure itself — a word, in fact which is absent from Clare's vocabulary — she shows herself truly moderate in relation to her times. All that is needed to leave the monastery legitimately is simply a motive that is useful, reasonable, manifest, and approved;¹¹⁵ or sensible moderation in the norms of bodily fasting¹¹⁶ and prolonged absences from the monasteries on the part of extern sisters.¹¹⁷ It is understandable that decisions about situations should give rise to pluralism of life in that which is not essential. Clare was not afraid of this. She knew that one led by the Spirit of the Lord will never lose a sense of the essential, to which she will remain faithful.

Towards the Future with Discernment

57. Intelligent and courageous discernment of vocations is imposed on all monasteries. Gifts, defects and limitations of every candidate are observed with attention. Limitations and defects are under the vigilant and motherly control of the formation director so as not to hinder the development and ripening of gifts. Discernment is more strictly enjoined on monasteries that lack vocations. Anxiety about survival often leads to risky superficial screening of requests for admission to the

¹¹⁴*RCI* VI 14—15.

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*, II 12.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, III 11.

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*, IX 12.

order. Collaboration between the monasteries, and especially the possibility offered with insistence by the church or belonging to federations, facilitates the difficult duty of discernment of vocations, making available people and assistance suitable to the needs of people and problems of our times.

As regards fidelity to Clare today, we must add concrete proposals of formation that should be stressed according to the times, circumstances and regions of those responsible for initial and ongoing formation. Nevertheless, wishing to avoid both paternalism and maternalism (which are more than ever out of place in our day), we fraternally invite every sister, every monastery, every federation, to embody the evangelical life in ever better ways in the spirit of collaboration, under the inspiration of the Lord and of His mother and ours, everywhere in the church and in the world, following our Lord Jesus Christ like Mary, "the Virgin-made-church" (*SalBVM* 1).

58. Among other evangelical values of Francis and Clare, permit us to bring to mind the following issues, which seem to us especially formative, inspirational, and worthy of renewal for our times:

a) A deep communion with the person of Christ in all His Paschal mystery centered on the cross of salvation;

b) An experience lived in the espoused or nuptial love of Mary, nourished by a liturgical-Eucharistic life and by a spirit of personal, contemplative prayer, jealously nurtured in the environment of poverty, humility and silence of the monastery.

c) The cordial and affectionate practice of brotherly rather than motherly love, that is, Marian love, in the unity of mutual charity which is the bond of perfection, especially toward the most needy sisters;

d) "Thinking with the church," in the clear knowledge that in the role of Mary one lives in the very heart of the church. The sincere acceptance of the incentives for renewal which the Magisterium often offers us is a clear sign of the wish to walk with the church. This is especially true in relation to the missionary spirit of the church, which always proposes new horizons for spreading the contemplative life in the world. That sense of church, which is so alive in holy Mother Clare, will be confirmed and strengthened through the *Directives* and the *Plans of Formation* of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life, and the Society of Apostolic Life on formation in religious institutes.¹¹⁸ The

¹¹⁸ *Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes*, February 2, 1990, nos. 73, 80, 85; John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio*, no. 69a.

federations or single monasteries know how to obtain these for themselves.

e) The preferential option for the poor, chosen by the church as a special sign of the times for all people, "especially those designated as consecrated."¹¹⁹

f) Love for Mother Earth, so often violated by people today, and which our sister, Lady Clare esteemed so highly: "When the most holy mother used to send the serving sisters outside the monastery, she reminded them to praise God when they saw beautiful trees, flowers, bushes; and likewise always to praise Him for and in all things when they saw all peoples and creatures."¹²⁰

g) Finally, as if welcoming the challenge of this most symbolic word "servants" — whether men or women — we must always discover more clearly the mystery of our evangelical life: to lead a life of service as men and women who are servants at the feet of all, with Mary, servant of the Lord, and with the Servant of Yahweh, Who, though Lord and Master, washed feet washed at the Last Supper (John 13: 13—14). This action and mystery, which Clare put into practice so efficaciously when she washed the feet of the sisters, brings us all back to the grasp she had of the full meaning of the unifying content of our vocation: a vocation of Friars Minor, of Poor Ladies, of penitential faithful at the service of all redeemed creation. It is a profound and multiform fraternity, open to universal praise: "Praise and bless my Lord, and give Him thanks and serve Him with great humility."¹²¹

Conclusion

The Lesson of Assisi

59. In a certain way Francis and Clare have placed themselves outside the world, making a complete break with that feudal, clerical and monastic society of their age to live without power and goods: "without anything of their own" — Francis, at the feet of everyone, anywhere in the world; Clare, at the feet of everyone, close to the Lord, in the cloister of San Damiano — both of them at the service of the poor whoever they may be, in the charity that is from God, in the Spirit and in the imitation of the Lord incarnate.

¹¹⁹*Directives on Formation*, nos. 14, 28.

¹²⁰*Proc XIV* 9.

¹²¹*CantSol* 14.

From this radical choice of Francis and Clare spring forth stimuli not only for the Poor Ladies, for the Friars Minor, or for those who aspire to "do penance" in the footsteps of Francis, but for all Christian brothers and sisters.

Francis and Clare "at the feet of all" speak to the urgent need in our time for us to enter again and be reconverted to a strong will to live in universal and cosmic brotherhood, freed from every proud form of self-assertion.

The prophetic sign of enclosure, which for Clare and the sisters had a literal and unrelinquishable character, would call back today's Christian to acknowledge his own objective need to concentrate on the person and life of Christ, Who is Person and Life charged with redemptive love for others, Who frees and fosters the human condition. Clare's "hiddenness" in Christ is a sign of each individual's focal point of the greatest openness to one's fellowman.

Still stronger, if that is possible, is the summons that comes from Clare's and Francis's highest poverty. Only a dispossession of material goods, which in Clare and Francis was radical, can efficaciously open one's heart to the needs of our brothers and sisters, after having reawakened conscience and the knowledge of the deep significance of the condition in which a great part of humanity finds itself. From the vision and admiration of Clare's and Francis's poverty it is natural to pass over to "solidarity," so recently brought back to the dulled minds of Christians by John Paul II's *Sollicitudo rei socialis* and *Centesimus Annus*. Only such an effective and global solidarity can give back to Christians their role, so often obscured today, of prophets of Christ: the "Son of Man who has come, not to be served by others, but to serve, to give His own life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28). "The spirit of the Lord is upon me ... to bring glad tidings to the poor" (Luke 4:18).

"This is the permanent lesson of Assisi." We would like to recall, as we did in the beginning, the words of authority pronounced by the Holy Father John Paul II. The pope pronounced them on the unforgettable Day of Assisi, October 27, 1986, at the prayer assembly of the representatives of all religions:

This is the permanent lesson of Assisi. It is the lesson of Francis who has incarnated for us an attractive ideal. It is the lesson of St. Clare, the first one to follow him. It is an ideal of gentleness, humility, of a deep sense of God and of the duty to serve everyone. St. Francis was a man of peace: St. Clare was, par excellence, the woman of prayer. Her union with God in prayer sustained Francis and his followers, as it sustains us today. Francis and Clare are examples of peace: with God, with themselves, with all men and women in this world.

Would that this holy man and this holy woman inspire all men and women of today to have the same strength of character and love for God

and for all people to continue on that path which we should all walk together.

Moved by the example of St. Francis and of St. Clare, true disciples of Christ, and convinced by the experience of this day which we have lived together, may we undertake to reexamine our conscience, to listen more carefully to its voice, to rid our minds of prejudice, hatred, unfriendliness, jealousy and envy. Let us seek to be workers for peace in thought and action, with mind and heart turned toward the unity of the human family. And we invite all our brothers and sisters to listen, so that they may act likewise.¹²²

Cloistered sisters, with heart full of joy and open to all joyous hope, we bless you.

Rome, May 19, 1991

Solemnity of Pentecost

John Vaughn, O.F.M., Minister General

Lanfranco Serrini, O.F.M.Conv., Minister General

Flavio Roberto Carraro, O.F.M.Cap., Minister General

José Angulo Quilis, T.O.R., Minister General

¹²²*Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, vol. 9, 2 (Rome 1986), p. 1270.