

Historical Analysis and Psychoanalytic Interpretations of a Vision of Clare of Assisi

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“Analisi storica e interpretazione psicanalitica di una visione di
Chiara d’Assisi”

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On October 18, 1253, scarcely two months after the death of Clare of Assisi, Innocent IV, from the Lateran, wrote a letter to Bartholomew, Bishop of Spoleto, inviting him “to diligently and carefully research her life, conversion, and manner of life, as well as the truth of all the aforesaid miracles and all their particulars, according to the questions we send you included under this Bull.”¹

Thus formally progressed the process of canonization of Clare of Assisi. A month later, on November 24, the first audience took place in the presence the following persons: Bartholomew, bishop of Spoleto; the attorney Mr. Martino; Leonardo, archdeacon of Spoleto; Giacomo, archpriest of Trevi; Brother Mark, the visitator of the sisters of San Damiano; and of two of the most faithful companions of Francis and Clare of Assisi, Leo and Angelo.

¹Introduction to the Bull *Gloriosus Deus* of Innocent IV, October 18, 1253. Its translation takes as its premise the *Acts of the Process of Canonization of St. Clare*. Our only manuscript is an Umbrian-Tuscan translation of the thirteenth century, handed down to us in the miscellaneous codex 1975/2040 of the private Landau Library, now in the Finlay-Landau depository of the National Library of Florence (cod. XXVIII, 135). The *Acts of the Process* were published for the first time by Zefferino Lazzeri, O.F.M., “Il processo di canonizzazione di S. Chiara d’Assisi,” *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 13 (1920):403—507, hereafter cited as *AFH*; and subsequently by *Fonti Franciscane*, vol. 2 (Assisi, 1977), ed. Chiara Augusta Lainati, O.S.C., pp. 2302—93. [Editor’s note: In our present article, for the following documents by or concerning Clare, we shall use Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M.Cap., ed. and trans., *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents* (New York and Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1988), with permission of the Paulist Press: — *Acts of the Process of Canonization of St. Clare*, pp. 126—75, hereafter cited as *Proc*; — *Testament*, pp. 54—59, hereafter cited as *TestCl*; — *Legend of St. Clare*, pp. 187—240, hereafter cited as *LegCl*.]

The process, at least as far as we can deduce from the only manuscript handed down to us,² lasted until November 29. Testimonies were heard, fifteen given by the sisters of San Daminano, plus a collective testimony from all the sisters reunited in the cloister.

Nevertheless, the "interrogations" that Innocent IV sent with his Bull have not been preserved. But from the minutes (verbal witness) of the interrogators, one can see well how all the testimonies answer a preestablished schema: life in the paternal home; conversion, namely the conduct during the years spent at San Damiano; and finally miracles, that is, all the signs that prove sanctity.

In the report of the third witness, Sister Filippa, daughter of Leonardo di Ghislerio, to these four categories another was added, which is the direct continuation of the category of her miracles: *Concerning the Predictions of Things to Come*. In this testimony Sister Filippa recalls that Clare's mother, while she was pregnant with Clare, while she was once praying about the dangers of childbirth, heard a voice saying to her: "You will give birth to a light that will shine brilliantly in the world."³ As one can see, this is an episode recurring very frequently in medieval hagiographic literature, which reflects on the one hand, the conditions of objective danger in which all medieval women found themselves during childbirth, and on the other hand, the belief that sanctity is a special virtue that God grants to some special people even from conception.

Sister Filippa, however, immediately afterwards adds another vision, this time about Clare herself, which presents totally original characteristics:

Lady Clare also related how once, in a vision, it seemed to her she brought a bowl of hot water to St. Francis, along with a towel for drying his hands. She was climbing a very high stairway, but was going very quickly, almost as though she were going on level ground. When she reached St. Francis, the saint bared his breast and said to the Lady Clare: "Come, take a drink." After she had sucked from it, the saint admonished her to imbibe once again. After she did so, what she had tasted was so sweet and delightful she in no way could describe it. After she had imbibed, that nipple or opening of the breast from which the milk came, remained between the lips of blessed Clare. After she took what remained in her

²The process of canonization, in the form handed down to us, probably gathers only a part of the testimonies. It is possible that there were successive audiences, and that other testimonies were heard, even if they were probably less important for a historical reconstruction of the life of the Lady of Assisi. See Lazzeri, *Il processo*, pp. 403—407; and *idem*: *De processu canonizationis S. Clarae*, in *AFH* 5 (1912):645.

³*Proc* III 28.

mouth in her hands, it seemed to her it was gold so clear and bright that everything was seen in it as in a mirror.⁴

Thomas of Celano, who was commissioned by the same Innocent IV to examine the acts of this process, in order to edit the official story of the saint of Assisi preferred to not include this vision in his work.⁵ The contents of the vision, in fact, and especially the gesture of Francis offering his breast to Clare, must have seemed too embarrassing to have included it in a work destined especially for the edification of virgins, numerous at that time, who wished to choose the new forms of religious life.⁶

The silence of the *Legend of St. Clare* has resulted in the fact that even to this day the attention of students has never touched on it. This absence of specific studies has been regretted by A. Vauchez during a recent meeting which took place in Assisi on the *Feminine and Franciscan Religious Movement in the Thirteenth Century*.⁷

Taking up again previous studies of the legend attributed to Thomas of Celano, we wish with this study to try to fill in this gap, trying to place the interpretation of the vision of the breast of St. Francis (as entitled by Martino, the same notary)⁸ in the center of the existential experience and the cultural world of Clare of Assisi.

Part 1

The Vision and the Existential "Lived" Experience of Clare

The special instrument for analyzing a text such as the vision related by Sister Filippa is psychoanalysis, especially the theory of interpretation of dreams.

⁴Ibid. 29.

⁵Throughout his article, Bartoli maintains that Thomas of Celano is the author of the *Legend of St. Clare*. There is no proof of this; nor is there any evidence that Pope Innocent IV commissioned him "to examine the acts [of the Process of Canonization] in order to edit the official story." For a thorough discussion of the Legend's authorship, read R.J. Armstrong: "Clare of Assisi, the Poor Ladies of San Damiano and Their Ecclesial Mission in the First Life of Thomas of Celano," *Greyfriars Review* 5, no. 3 (1991):389-424).

⁶We make our own the conviction expressed by Father Engelbert Grau, O.F.M., at the Assisi meeting on the "Movimento religioso femminile e francescanesimo nel secolo XIII," *Atti della Società Internazionale di Studi Francescani* (Assisi: 1979). According to Grau, Thomas of Celano, the author of the *Legenda Sanctae Clarae Virginis*, must have remembered. As for the virgins to whom the work was addressed, see the introductory letter of the same story, in CoA:ED, p. 189. See n. 1 above.

⁷The same meeting referred to in the preceding note.

⁸The notary gave it this title when he summarized it, expressing the successive testimonies.

Immediately, however, two great objections arise. The first concerns the validity of the instrument: Sister Filippa speaks of a vision, not of a dream; she doesn't, in fact, mention a state of dream. Is it lawful, then, to analyze our text according to the interpretation of dreams?

There are three answers to this question. In the first place, the Middle Ages (the medieval mind) know a certain confusion of vocabulary by which dream and vision are frequently used one for the other.⁹

Secondly, if one doesn't mention a state of sleep, neither does one deny it. The same Sister Filippa, shortly before speaking about the vision, had hinted at another miraculous episode of which Clare had been the protagonist: "During the day of Good Friday, while thinking about the passion of the Lord, she was almost insensible throughout that entire day and a large part of the following day."¹⁰ Thomas of Celano, who in addition to the testimonies of the process, personally questioned the sisters,¹¹ enlarges in his *Legend* upon the hinting of Sister Filippa and puts in the mouth of Clare, at the end of her ecstasy, these words addressed to a sister: "May that vision be blessed, most dear daughter! Because after having desired it for so long, it has been given to me. But be careful not to tell anyone about that vision while I am still in the flesh" (*LegCl* 31).¹² We know for certain, therefore, that Clare experienced moments of ecstasy which she herself, or at least her biographer, describes with the word 'sleep'. Nothing, therefore, prevents hypothesizing that even the vision with which we are concerned belongs to this genre of experiences.¹³

Thirdly, vision, even for contemporary psychoanalysis, is closely related to dream. Even if it is generally considered the expression of pathological situations, Freud recognizes that it can be experienced even by psychologically sane individuals. Like the dream, the vision represents a moment of the repression of the self; like the dream, it is a

⁹See Jacques Le Goff, "I sogni nella cultura e nella psicologia collettiva dell'Occidente medievale," in *Tempo della Chiesa e tempo del mercante* (Turin, 1977), p. 283, note.

¹⁰*Proc* III 25.

¹¹"Igitur me colligens ad mandatum, nec tutum ratus per ea procedere quae defectiva legebam, ad socios beati Francisci, atque ad ipsum collegium virginum Christi perrexi," in Francesco Pennacchi, ed., *Legenda Sanctae Clarae Virginis* (Assisi, 1910), p. 2.

¹²CoA:ED, pp. 219—20.

¹³Furthermore, this difficulty in distinguishing between dream and a waking state is found in almost all ecstatic experiences. From many examples let us cite only the case of Angela of Foligno, who, although placed in a cultural context different from that of Clare (ten to twenty years after her death), constitutes an important point of reference: "Once those eyes were shown to me.... I don't know if it was while I was sleeping or was awake, but I found myself in this immense and indescribable joy," in S. Aliquò, trans. and ed., *L'esperienza di Dio amore: Il libro* (Rome, 1973), p. 67.

realization of an unconscious desire. Just as for the dream, it needs for its formation a certain indulgence on the part of censorship.¹⁴

In wishing to attempt a psychological definition of Clare's vision, we can say: 1) It happened in a moment of suspended conscious activity (we don't know with certainty whether in a state of dream or wakefulness), similar to a transautohypnotic state. In fact, in the testimony cited, there is no reference to any external element which might have provoked it, and the manner itself in which Clare related it to the sisters makes it clear that she experienced it as an other than herself and of her consciousness; 2) It is a question of a hallucinatory reality, of an unconscious desire, comparable to a dream, which all the characteristics of a *visutoplasia* (lived experience) and not an *ideoplasia* (thought experience). In other words, the narrative seems to be the expression of a lived experience remaining at the level of a sensation, not yet rationally organized.¹⁵

The second objection regards, on the other hand, the contents of our study. Here it is a matter of the analysis of a written document, under the pretense of putting together certain elements of the unconscious of a person who lived several centuries ago. It is, as can be seen, the basic problem of relations between psychoanalysis and literature, and psychoanalysis and historical research. The debate on these themes is so vast that one can only make an attempt at it.¹⁶

As regards Clare's vision, we can emphasize only that the literary elaboration of our testimony (different from that of many other medieval visions) has been minimal. The sisters who related the vision at the process had heard it from the mouth of Clare herself. The notary Martino has transcribed it in Latin (probably omitting repetitions typical of the oral account but without omitting any important details). Finally, an anonymous person has translated it in an Umbrian-Tuscan dialect very faithful to the Latin text. This may seem to be a long-

¹⁴"According to me, the explanation of visions in psychologically normal individuals is found in the fact that they are in reality regressions, that is, thoughts transformed into images; but that the only thoughts that undergo this transformation are those strictly bound together in remembrances that have been repressed or which have remained unconscious," in Sigmund Freud, *L'interpretazione dei sogni* (Rome, 1976), pp. 435—36.

¹⁵For the psychoanalytic terminology, we have made use of Laplanche and Pontalis, *Enciclopedia della psicanalisi* (Bari, 1968). Special thanks, therefore, to Professor Silvana Quattrocchi, who has effectively guided me in the correspondence phase of my research.

¹⁶The bibliography is vast. For a first orientation, see Bianca and Franco Fornari, *Psicanalisi e ricerca letteraria* (Milan, 1974); A. Besançon, *Vers une histoire psychanalytique*, I and II, in *Annales ESC* (1960) nos. 3—4, pp. 594—616, and pp. 1011—33.

enough course, but in the Middle Ages this was the literary genre of visions. One can easily understand how ours has in great part kept closely to a direct account.¹⁷

In saying that Clare's vision represents a special case, we do not wish to undervalue the objection of which we spoke. To avoid easy solutions or arbitrary interpretations, one must proceed with extreme caution, aware that from this point all the results will be seen as not having a credible value, but only the value of interpretative hypotheses which will in turn be brought forth face to face with other testimonies (especially with the writings of Clare herself).

Precisely in order to arrive at a result as reliable as possible, in the present study an analysis interlaced with our text is attempted: on the one hand, that which is strictly psychoanalytic; on the other, the more literary one that analyzes the symbolic language used by Clare within what presumably was her culture.

Before delving into the analysis of the vision, it is necessary, however, to try to date it; that is, to establish when Clare had it. We can say for certain that it was after the death of Francis. In fact, one of the witnesses who remembered it is Amata di Martino, from Coccorano, who entered the monastery not before 1228/29,¹⁸ unless Clare, having had the vision sometime before, had not thought of relating it to her companions until after the death of St. Francis.¹⁹ The directness of the account, however, and the richness of the particular details lead one to think, rather, that the vision was given in the last years of the life of

¹⁷According to Pierre Deloiz: "Sometimes the sociologist dreams of conducting an investigation by means of interviews going back hundreds of years. Our field of observation is without doubt one of the few that permit of success. In fact, the processes of beatification contain true and fitting registers of interviews that go back many centuries," in "Per uno studio sociologico della santità," *Agiografia altomedievale* (Bologna, 1976). See idem, "La canonizzazione dei santi e la sua utilizzazione sociale," in *Concilium*, vol. 15 (1979). The value of the testimonies produced at a process of canonization is appreciated when face to face with true and fitting literary works like the *legendae*, which are treated of themselves. An example of this is given by J.C. Schmitt, "La parola addomesticata: San Domenico, il gatto e le donne di Fanjeaux," in *Quaderni Storici* 41 (1979):416—39.

¹⁸Sister Amata, blood niece of Clare, testified that "she had been twenty-five years in that order" at the time of the Process. In addition: "She said the same as Sister Filippa concerning the miracle of St. Clare's mother, her vision and the breast of St. Francis, and the miracle of the night of the Lord's nativity," in *Proc* IV 16.

¹⁹However, this hypothesis would not explain how Clare would have waited two years after the death of Francis (1226) to relate the vision to the sisters. In such a case, in the Process there would have been a reference to the circumstances that prompted the telling. More realistic is the hypothesis that Clare, as she was accustomed to do, related her vision immediately after she had had it.

Clare, shortly before the time of the process during which it was narrated.

The vision is made up of different fragments or images. In the first, Clare brings a vessel of warm water to Francis; in the second, Francis is at the top of a stairway; in the third, Clare nurses at the breast of Francis; in the fourth, she hints at the sweetness of the milk she has sucked; in the fifth, the nipple of Francis's breast remains in her mouth; in the last, Clare takes it in her hands and mirrors herself in it.

In the image of Clare taking a vessel of warm water to Francis, with a towel, there is probably the direct memory of an experience she had lived. During the last part of his life, Francis was very sick with an eye malady and spent, precisely because of this illness, an entire winter at San Damiano, composing on this occasion the *Canticle of Brother Sun*.²⁰ In those days, Clare cared for him, and it is very probable that she even took care of him in the necessities that derived from his illness. The warm water and the towel probably were the usual instruments of this care. If the vision, as we have seen, is dated after the death of Francis, one can well understand how Clare recalls it above all as a need for healing, imagining herself as she is hurrying to go to him; otherwise the water would become cold.

But in the second frame Francis is not sick; he is even standing at the top of a steep stairway. This placing of Francis, even physically, more elevated, already tells us more about the unconscious state of Clare. It is, in fact, a typical expression of a rapport of dependence. Even if she had seen herself while she was tending Francis, Clare knows that between the two of them it is she who is the smaller, who remains lower, who must learn from him.²¹

But the most interesting detail, and that which caused more scandal, is that of the "nursing" of Clare. The fact that Francis draws his breast out of his bosom and offers it to Clare doesn't ring strange on a

²⁰See *Compilatio Assisiensis*, ed. Marino Bigaroni, O.F.M., nos. 83—85 (Assisi, 1975), pp. 230—47. See *2Cel* 132, and *SP* 91—100.

²¹Let us deliberately set aside the detail of stairs, because all that Freud says concerning stairs does not seem applicable: "Stairs are evident symbols of coitus. It is not difficult to find the basis of the comparison. One reaches the top with a series of rhythmic movements and with increasing loss of breath; then with rapid jumps one is again at the bottom. Therefore, the rhythmic schema of coitus is reproduced in climbing stairs." Clare on the contrary "was going very quickly, almost as though she were going on level ground." In the vision, the attention seems to be entirely concentrated on the fact that the stairway is high, that is, steep, and therefore on the more elevated position of Francis in relation to that of Clare — a fact that harmonizes well with the other details of the vision, all reducible to an "oral phase" of psychological development. We shall refer to this subsequently.

psychoanalytic plane. In dreams, or better, on the plane of the unconscious, there is, in fact, no distinction between male and female.²² In oneiric language, the image never expresses what the reality is, but that which it represents for the one who dreams.²³ Breast feeding is a primitive experience of every individual, which is bound to that phase of psychological development that Freud calls 'oral phase'. Here is clarified the rapport of dependence that they had already fulfilled. Clare, in the vision, lives that same experience of effective relationship that is lived with a mother, which then is the primitive expression of every relationship and of every affection. For the infant, to attach himself to the nipple means to continue in some sense to be entirely one with the mother. The oral rapport is characterized precisely by this search to possess; it is a relationship made of penetration, of 'englobing'.

The relationship between mother and child presupposes one who gives and one who makes one's own. Thus, as in the vision, Francis draws his breast from his bosom and offers it to Clare, who attaches herself to it and sucks the milk. The repetition of the gesture and of the related command of Francis is nothing but a reinforcement by which the unconscious of Clare seems to signal the importance of this moment.

In the fourth fragment Clare says that "what she had tasted was so sweet and delightful she in no way could describe it." In the unconscious, the sweet taste of a mother's milk is deeply bound with the complete experience (physical and psychological) of nursing at the breast. Even in this case we are faced with the difficulty of not being able today to ask Clare herself to make some free associations which would permit us to put together the value that this unconscious memory had for her. We must remember that, as generally happened in the Middle Ages, she must have been nursed at the breast until the age of two or three years, which explains why the memory of being nursed and the sweet taste of the maternal milk remained so vivid in her memory.

²²"The tendency of dreams and unconscious fantasies to employ sexual symbols bisexually reveals an archaic characteristic. In fact, during infancy the distinction between the genitals is unknown, and the same characteristics are attributed to both sexes," in Freud, *L'interpretazione dei sogni*, p. 295.

²³This is the fundamental characteristic that makes an oneiric language a symbolic language: "In symbolic language, interior experiences are expressed as though they were sensorial experiences, that is, as something that has been experienced or undergone in the external world. In it the external world is a symbol of the interior world, a symbol for our souls and for our minds," in E. Fromm, *The Forgotten Language* (New York, 1951), p. 16, a translation of G. Bianzoni, *Il linguaggio dimenticato* (Milan, 1962).

In the fifth frame the memory of nursing become more precise. Not only does Clare nurse at the breast of Francis, but "the nipple or opening of the breast from which the milk came remained between the lips of blessed Clare." The infant, while nursing at the breast, bites the breast of the mother. This is the primitive unconscious experience that underlies every expression of the oral phase of psychological evolution. This phase is, in fact, characterized by the desire to take something that is other than ourselves in order to make it part of ourselves. Freud several times underlines the relationship between the symbol of eating and the effective and sexual experience. Here, however, the symbol is already self-explanatory. In the nipple, which remains in Clare's mouth, is the satisfaction of the primitive desire to continue to be only one being with the mother, to be able to make one's own, the other — in this case Francis — most intimately. In the unconscious — and for that matter, more generically in every symbolic language — the part stands for the whole. The infant wants to possess the mother's breast because it is the whole mother it wants to make its own. In our vision also, the detail of the "opening of the breast" indicates the whole person of Francis. Here Clare realizes her unconscious desire to make her own, to possess, to become one unique being with Francis.

It would seem that the vision could terminate here. Francis has been possessed, made Clare's own. This already is the realization of her unconscious desire. And yet, however, there is a last image that still reveals many details of no little interest.

Above all else, Clare takes in her hands that which had remained in her mouth, and this appears to her as gold. This has been transformed into a precious thing. It is necessary to underscore the importance of this gold. Clare had willingly renounced all her goods and all her riches. For a woman, this renunciation had not only an economic or social value. She had also renounced her jewels, which, even if they mustn't have been many (she being a provincial family of low aristocracy), must have nevertheless a great effective interest. Clare renounced all this on the word of and — why not? — out of affection for Francis. Our vision seems to say to us, and perhaps to Clare herself, that she found gold in the friendship and love of Francis, which is a precious thing, more precious than any jewel she had renounced. The vision concludes saying: "It seemed to her it was gold so clear and bright that everything was seen it, as in a mirror."

Clare's desire was, therefore, not only that of making Francis her own, of possessing him, but that of full identity — the desire, that is, to become one sole entity with Francis. She looks at herself in the Francis whom she has possessed, and she sees herself there.

All that we have said so far helps us to put together the value of the relationship between the two saints of Assisi, which will permit us to

see, on the part of Clare, a profound affection that we can only call love. But the vision even helps us to understand as well the psychological experience of Clare's witness for more than twenty-five years, after the death of Francis, during which she strenuously defended the primitive ideal of Franciscan life, holding in her heart the order and the entire church, like a true and fitting "other Francis."

Finally, an explanation is to be found in the fact that the notary thought it fitting to insert this vision under the title *De li presagi, de le cose da venire* (Of the Foreshadowing of Things to Come). It is probable that the sisters at San Damiano, if not Clare herself, may have read this vision as a foreshadowing of the imminent reunion of Clare and Francis in paradise; but this hypothesis already omits the psychoanalytic tool in order to penetrate the cultural analysis of the one who had the vision and in which it was interpreted.

Part 2

The Dream, the Symbolic Language, and the Culture of Clare

All that has been said so far attempts to explain the link between the dream,²⁴ the unconscious, and the existential experience of Clare. It remains, however, to explain how she used these images, or better, these symbols — and not others — in order to explain all this. Water, stairs, breast, milk, the mirror — These are all images which are frequently found in the literature of visions and more generally in mythological as well as oneiric language.²⁵

In his work on oneiric language, Erich Fromm puts forth a classification of symbols in three categories: accidental, universal, and conventional. We shall hold to this classification in this work. For example, the water that Clare brings to Francis in a vessel is, as we have seen, an accidental symbol, in the sense that the relationship between the symbol of water and the experience of Clare who cared for the sick Francis is totally personal. But water is also a universal symbol. Like fire and so many other things, it is part of experiences common to all people of all cultures and of all times, and furthermore symbolizes a sense of vitality, continuity and energy.²⁶ On the other hand, water, in the culture of the people of central Italy of the thirteenth century, is also a

²⁴[In keeping with more recent research in the English language, the term 'dream' is to be used for the remainder of this article. — Trans.]

²⁵Fromm, *The Forgotten Language*, pp. 15—27.

²⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 20—21.

conventional symbol. It contains a whole series of cultural references, fruit of the Christian tradition as well as various folkloric cultures.

To track down the ties and connections between the images used by Clare and the culture in which she lived is not an easy task. Above all, it opens us up to the risk of bringing to light unjust references. Our work moves forward, beginning with a double interpretative grid. The first is that supplied by the preceding psychoanalytic interpretation. The dream, broken down into moments, will be studied analytically in order to later make an attempt at an interpretative synthesis.²⁷ The second grid is that supplied by the very culture of Clare, as much as it can be derived from other sources at our disposal. Clare did not attend school. Her culture was that which her mother gave her at home,²⁸ and then that which she received from Francis at San Damiano, from the other sisters, and from the friars who frequented the place.²⁹ And yet Clare was a cultured woman. Her writings (especially the letters and the *Rule*) give evidence of a rich intellectual elaboration. The sources of that culture of hers were especially two: the first, biblical-liturgical,³⁰ and the second, monastic-hagiographic.³¹

"It seemed to her she brought a bowl of hot water to St. Francis, along with a towel for drying his hands." Water, as we have said, is a universal symbol found in all cultures, even the most primitive. A symbol of life itself and fount of life, water is the fundamental element of every cosmology.³²

²⁷For the connections and the reciprocity of the two parts of the present work, see further on.

²⁸"From the mouth of her mother she first received with a docile heart the fundamentals of the faith," in *LegCl* 2.

²⁹"Although she was not educated in the liberal arts, she nevertheless enjoyed listening to the sermons of those who were," in *LegCl* 37.

³⁰Clare's writings show a good knowledge of (and a discreet familiarity with) the New Testament, especially of some books of the Old Testament, particularly of the Song of Solomon.

³¹The *Rule* written by Clare shows a good knowledge of preceding monastic Rules. As regards hagiographic culture, which constituted a great part of the subject matter of the sermons Clare loved to listen to (see n. 5 above), one must think that it was a matter above all of hagiography of a Franciscan society.

³²According to G. van der Leeuw: "Water is essentially feminine ('Water is a woman', says Varrone) and mother. Lifegiving, it renews the life of all beings. The symbol of generative and regenerative water could come from the very distant past. The waters of the chaos from which the world emerged and the water that surrounds the fetus in the maternal womb are exactly parallel," in *Fenomenologia della religione* (Turin, 1975), pp. 38—40. See also M. Eliade, *Traité d'histoire des religions: Morphologie du sacré* (Paris, 1953), p. 184: "Whatever may be the religious whole in which they present themselves, the function of waters is always presented in the same way." However, these generalizations must not make us forget the evident differences between two cultures, and even the ambivalence of

Even in the Bible, water is the symbol of life. In the New Testament (doubtless the part of the Bible more accessible to Clare) water is above all associated with the rite of baptism,³³ by means of which the catechumen is purified from his own sin and at the same time becomes a part of the community.³⁴ In John's Gospel, one speaks in this sense of living water, a symbol of the same spirit of God which makes one pass from darkness to light, from death to life.³⁵

The fathers of the church have pursued this study of symbolism, enriching and broadening it. From water has risen coolness, symbol of lessening of concupiscence;³⁶ or else transparency, symbol of the light of the spirit.³⁷

In medieval culture, that is, in an agricultural culture, water had a very great importance. On it depended the scarcity or abundance of the harvest; and to water used in the liturgy was attributed a thaumaturgical power.³⁸ When Francis composed the *Canticle of Brother Sun* at San Damiano, it was not by accident that he said appropriately: "Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water, which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste."³⁹

Clare, however, brings to Francis a bowl of hot water. The reference, therefore, cannot be directly to that living water of which we have spoken. To interpret correctly the symbolic value of this water one must connect it with the other object that Clare has in her hand: a towel. One then understands how the immediate reference is to another extract from the Gospel of John: "During the supper, Jesus ... rose from the

the symbol of water — bringer of life, but also of death. See *Enciclopedia delle religioni*, s.v. "Aqua."

³³See J. Danielou, "Le symbolisme des rites baptismaux," in *Dieu vivant* 1 (1945):15—45; D. Mollat, "Symbolismes baptismaux chez S. Paul," in *Lumière et vie* 26 (1956):62—67; J. Gaillard, *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, s.v. "Eau."

³⁴Immersion (or lacking this, simple ablution) indicates a regeneration by means of a sort of "reintegration in the world differentiated from cosmic preexistence" followed by a repetition of the "cosmogonic actions of formal manifestation," in Eliade, *Traité d'histoire*, p. 168. See also G. Bachelard, *L'eau et le rêves* (Paris, 1942).

³⁵John, 4:13—14, and 7:38. See F. M. Braun, "Le baptême d'après le quatrième Evangile," in *Revue thomiste* 48 (1948):390ff.

³⁶St. Ambrose, "De mysteriis," 3, 13; *PL* 13, 395a.

³⁷St. Thomas, *Summa theologiae*, III, q. 66 a. 3.

³⁸A value of exorcism is attributed to various ceremonies of purification. To speak of proclaiming the Lord's triumph and to drive further away "the prince of the world, his temptations and his intrigues" from homes of believers and from the objects that they use, see the *Missale Romanum*: "The blessing of water." The most recent analysis of the typological aspects of the use of holy water and of blessings-exorcisms by means of water in the Church is made by A. Franz, *Die kirchlichen Benediktionen im Mittelalter*, vol. 1 (Graz, 1960), pp. 43—220.

³⁹*CantSol* 7.

meal and took off his cloak. He picked up a towel and tied it around Himself. Then He poured water into a basin and began to wash His disciples' feet."⁴⁰ It is the passage of the washing of feet, a passage particularly dear to the Franciscan tradition, the same symbol of that poverty and humility voluntarily chosen by Francis and Clare. Thus Francis, to repeat the Lord's action, washed the feet of the lepers,⁴¹ and Clare washed the feet of serving sisters.⁴² Here emerge the biblical-liturgical substrata of Clare's culture. Here, too, is probably a reminder of the ceremony of Holy Thursday, during which the celebrant repeats the action of Jesus.⁴³

"She was climbing a very high stairway, but was going very quickly, almost as though she were going on level ground." The vision of Clare presents the classic image of the climb or ascent towards heaven. It is a case of an image dear to myths, legends and rites attested to on all continents and in all times where archaic reference is unquestionable.⁴⁴

The idea of ascension into heaven corresponds to the cosmological idea that sees various "heavens," ordered hierarchically, circumscribing the earth, the center of the universe. They correspond to the steps of a cosmic ladder, which after death the soul must climb before reuniting itself with God.⁴⁵

This idea, perhaps of Iranian origin, is attested to in ancient Hebrew literature, outside Biblical literature.⁴⁶ "It is revealed in a classical manner in Gnostic, Hellenistic and Judaic trends that were affirmed for several centuries before and after Christianity."⁴⁷

⁴⁰ John 13:2—5. [Our translation of Scripture texts is taken from the *New American Bible*. — Trans.].

⁴¹ *LM* II 6.

⁴² The action of the washing of feet by Clare is recalled by at least four witnesses at the process of canonization.

⁴³ The tie between Clare's action and the liturgy of Holy Thursday, evidently imitated by her, is clear in the testimony of Sister Agnes, daughter of Oportulo de Bernardo of Assisi: "One time, while washing the feet of one of the serving sisters, and wanting to kiss them as she usually did, that sister involuntarily hit [Lady Clare's] mouth with her foot. The Lady rejoiced at this and kissed the sole of that foot. Asked how she knew this, she replied she had seen it. Asked what time, she replied it was during Lent. Asked what day, she replied a Thursday" (*Proc*) X 6.

⁴⁴ See E. Betraud and A. Rayes, in *Dict. de spiritualité*, s.v. "Echelle spirituelle."

⁴⁵ "Funeral rites lean on the belief that before the soul reaches God it must make a difficult journey across the different heavens. This passage was called a 'cosmic ladder' or the 'ladder of the seven heavens'," in Bellarmino Bagatti, *L'église de la circoncision* (Jerusalem, 1955), p. 230.

⁴⁶ It is more exactly attested to in the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, in the *Second Book of Enoch* (3, 20), in *The Ascension of Isaiah* (7, 10) and in the *Third Book of Baruch* (2, 16). See Bagatti, *L'église*, p. 231.

⁴⁷ Van der Leeuw, *Fenomenologia*, p. 243. As early as Plato, one finds the principle of the

In the Bible, the principal reference is the dream of Jacob: "Then he had a dream: a stairway rested on the ground, with its top reaching to the heavens; and God's messengers were going up and down on it. And there was the Lord standing beside him."⁴⁸ Jacob's ladder had great success in all of Christian literature. For that matter, Jesus Himself had referred to it: "You shall see the sky opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of man."⁴⁹

From the time of Perpetua, martyred in Africa at the beginning of the third century (202/203),⁵⁰ there has been practically no Christian author who hasn't had recourse to the image of the ladder, in its various accepted meanings of a cosmic ladder, a ladder of perfection, a ladder of virtue, a ladder of spiritual love, a ladder of martyrs and ladder of contemplatives. In order to explain a similar diffusion, it is not necessary to read into it a transposing of pagan themes, which "in the nature of things seek to represent each climb — physical, intellectual, moral or spiritual — through the images of degrees, steps, and therefore of the ladder."⁵¹ Through Origen, Augustine and then Gregory the Great, the image of the ladder has been fixed as the ascent of the soul towards God. In the Middle Ages it will be above all the monastic school (through Cassian) that will make the ladder (or the soul's ascent) its theme.

In the twelfth century, stairs had an immense success in the different schools of spirituality: it is found, for example, in Bernard of Clairvaux,⁵² Richard of St. Victor,⁵³ and Eckbert of Schönau,⁵⁴ becoming a true and proper literary genre which will continue to have great success in the following centuries.⁵⁵

three lives: purgative, illuminative and unitive, and the image of the stairs (see A. Festugière, *Contemplation et vie contemplative selon Platon* [Paris, 1936]). Plotinus (see *Dict. de spiritualité*) and Avicenna (see L. Gardet, *La pensée religieuse d'Avicenne* [Paris, 1951]) have a special importance as a follow-up for the resumption of the subject.

⁴⁸ Gen. 28:12.

⁴⁹ John 1:51.

⁵⁰ "The symbolism of the ladder spread rapidly in the whole Christian world, and the vision of Perpetua, martyred in Africa at the beginning of the third century, does not miss having recourse to it. Before climbing the stepladder to mount to heaven, the saint must overcome a last difficulty: to defend oneself from the dragon who, at the foot of the ladder, seeks to stop his 'passage'," in Bagatti, *L'église*, p. 173.

⁵¹ Bertaud and Rayez, *Dict. de spiritualité*, s.v. "Echelle."

⁵² Bernard of Clairvaux, "De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae," *PL*, 182, 941—72.

⁵³ Richard of St. Victor, "De gradibus caritatis," *PL* 194, 1195—98.

⁵⁴ Eckbert de Schönau, *Sermo 2 de beata Maria Virgine*, in which is applied to the Virgin the idea of the ladder of humility with twelve steps.

⁵⁵ Already the *Speculum virginum* presents the delicate and difficult ascension of virginity by means of five steps. Of the immediate body of literature, which at the end of

Therefore, Clare must have received the echo of this immense bulk of research. But how can one gather together the direct references that inspired her?

A work that Clare certainly knew, and which had a decisive importance in the furthering of the idea of the spiritual stairway, is the *Rule of St. Benedict*. The entire seventh chapter is dedicated to this theme: "Therefore, O brothers, if we want to reach the summit of the deepest humility and arrive in short to that heavenly exaltation to which one rises with the humility of the present life, we must build, with our actions directed on high, that ladder which appeared in a dream to Jacob, and by means of which were seen angels climbing and descending. Decent and rising are to be understood undoubtedly in the sense that pride makes one come down and humility makes one rise."⁵⁶

The ladder of the *Rule of St. Benedict* is, therefore, the ladder of humility. The spiritual theme that we have already underscored comes back in substance: water and the washing of feet. This constitutes a true and fitting leitmotif of our vision of humility.

There is, however, in Clare's dream, an element that seems astonishing as regards the symbolism of the spiritual climb. At the top of the stairs there is not the Lord, the divinity with Whom the soul must reunite itself, but Francis. It is an element only partly eccentric. Elizabeth of Schönau, for example, had a vision in which angels were descending from heaven on a ladder even to the top of the altar of incense. At the top of the ladder were the apostle James, St. Christian, and the Virgin Mary.⁵⁷

But Clare had at her disposal other examples closer to her. Thomas of Celano, in his *Second Life of Francis*, tells of a vision of Brother Pacificus, who, seeing the heavens, noticed that one of the thrones, the most beautiful one for the blessed, was empty. At the same moment he heard a voice that said to him: "This throne belonged to one of the fallen angels, but now it is reserved for the humble Francis."⁵⁸ This vision, which had such success⁵⁹ that Giotto chose to represent it in the upper basilica in Assisi, turns once more to the subject of humility. Lucifer, the

the thirteenth century takes up again the theme of the ladder, we quote only the work of Beatrice of Nazareth: *Van seven manieren van Minnen* (The Seven Steps of Charity), eds. Reypiens and Van Mierlo (Louvain, 1926), because it seems especially useful to point out the elements common between the culture of Clare and that of other women religious contemporaries of hers even in the most distant zones of Europe.

⁵⁶*Rule of St. Benedict*, chap. 7.

⁵⁷Elisabetta di Schönau, *Vita*, 27, PL 195, 135ab.

⁵⁸2Cel 86.

⁵⁹See also LM VI 6; LP 23; SP 60.

most proud angel, is cast down; Francis, the most humble man, must take his place.

These references permit one to form a precise-enough first idea for an interpretation of the vision. Francis, who has gone before her on the ladder of humility, is now at the top. Clare, holding in her hands the symbols of the washing of feet, that is, of humility, follows him.

The stairway is high, that is, steep, but Clare climbs it "quickly, almost as though she were going on level ground." The absence of effort comes from Clare's degree of perfection. According to classical cosmology, taken up later for example by Dante,⁶⁰ the purest souls rise to God in greater haste. When she reached St. Francis, the saint bared his breast and said to the Lady Clare: "Come, take a drink."

In Benedict's *Rule*, just before the passage on the ladder of humility reported above, Psalm 130 is quoted: "If I did not ponder humbly, and were proud within myself, like a small child to whom the mother denies her breast, so was my soul punished."⁶¹

The parallelism to our vision is too strong not to be underscored. The *Rule* recalls the image of the infant who is just being denied breastfeeding, in order to then introduce the image of the ladder of humility. Clare instead climbs a high stairway, and on top she finds a mother — Francis, who offers his breast to her.

There is another detail that leads one to underscore the reference to this Psalm. It is, in fact, part of a group of fifteen Psalms called in the Vulgate, *Cantica graduum*, from the Hebrew *Ma'aloth* (steps). Therefore, even in the title, the idea of the sacred ladder is brought to mind. In this instance it is probably that of the temple of Jerusalem, climbed in procession by pilgrims during the major feasts.

However, the detail that most drew the attention of the notary who transcribed the process of canonization was the breast of St. Francis, as we have already seen. If, as we have said, the breast is part of the primitive experiences that are recorded in the individual unconscious, in the same way one can say that it is part of the mythical-religious archaic patrimony that is common to the collective unconscious of the most diverse peoples. To understand this, it suffices to recall the most disparate representations of the goddess-mother idea, in whom the breast, or better still, the breasts (often there are even more than two) are the very symbol of motherhood and fecundity.

⁶⁰The entire *Divine Comedy* is based on the cosmology of the cosmic ladder and the ascent of the soul towards heaven. In chapter 21 of "Il Paradiso," however, he especially applies that image to contemplatives.

⁶¹Obviously the quotation of the *Rule* follows the *Vulgate*.

In the Bible one alludes to a maternal breast by way of Jerusalem, the "mother" of the people of Israel: "Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad because of her, all you who love her;... O that you may suck fully of the milk of her comfort, that you may nurse with delight at her abundant breasts!"⁶² It is a question of the last prophecy contained in the Book of Isaiah, which is introduced in the expectation of glory and of peace that will enfold Israel at the return from the exile. Here the image is referred to Jerusalem. More often, it is God Himself who is seen as a mother who nourishes her children: "I drew them with human cords, with bands of love; I fostered them like one who raises an infant to his cheeks;... I stooped to feed my child."⁶³

A final scriptural reference is found in the Book of Proverbs: "Qui fortiter premit ubera ad eliciendum lac, exprimit butyrum; vehementer emungit, elicit sanguinem" (He who forcefully squeezes the breast in order to draw milk, squeezes butter instead; he who squeezes violently draws blood.)⁶⁴ Here, it is true, one refers to the breasts of animals, but the reference is equally important, because it was very popular with medieval writers⁶⁵ who, applying the metaphor to the same Scripture, speak of "intellectum Scripturae emungere."

After she had sucked from it, the saint admonishes her to imbibe one again. After she did so, what she had tasted was so sweet and delightful she in no way could describe it.

Clare, therefore, feeds herself at Francis's bosom. In eating there is satisfaction. Also there is the answer not only to an unconscious desire of Clare, but even to that "obsession, which above that of any other, accompanied medieval man throughout the centuries — hunger."⁶⁶

Our attention, however, is brought back to "what she had tasted," namely, the milk sucked from the bosom of Francis. Clare does not explicitly use the word 'milk'. Even though what she takes is so sweet and delightful, it cannot be anything but this. It is a question, however, of a milk "so sweet and delightful she in no way could describe it," that is, of a spiritual milk, which gives an ineffable sweetness, also experienced by Ezekiel, who, seeing the glory of God, received and ate the scroll of Lamentations and said to the people: "I ate it, and it was for my mouth as sweet as honey."⁶⁷

⁶² Isaiah 66:10—11.

⁶³ Hosea 11:4. See also Isaiah 66:13: "As a mother comforts her son, so will I comfort you."

⁶⁴ Prov. 30:33. Here again the text is from the *Vulgate*.

⁶⁵ See H. De Lubac, *Esegesi medievale* (Alba, 1972), pp. 538—39.

⁶⁶ P. Repetto, "Aspetti quotidiani della mentalità," in *Storia d'Italia e d'Europa*. Vol. 2: *Apogeo e crisi del Medioevo* (Milan, 1978), p. 394.

⁶⁷ Ezek. 3: 1—4.

It is probable that the choice of the paraphrase 'what she takes' (instead of 'milk') is not accidental, but that it was preferred in order to better render the spiritual meaning of the dream.

Also, nursing is a recurring image in the history of religions. Heroes are often nursed by animals⁶⁸ or by gods. Heracles, for example, through a miraculous intervention of the gods, sucked milk from the bosom of Hera, thus attaining immortality.⁶⁹ Milk, as a mythological concept, is food of the gods. In an eschatological sense, it is a heavenly food. In a magical sense, finally, it is the agent of life.

In the Old Testament, milk (often with honey) represents abundance, characteristic of the land promised to the people of Israel.⁷⁰ Then is a more general sense, the last days.⁷¹ In the New Testament, milk is a spiritual drink that represents divine doctrine. Peter's First Letter says: "Be as eager for milk as newborn babies — pure milk of the spirit to make you grow unto salvation."⁷² This comparison between milk and the same doctrine is derived from a pneumatic language, which is probably based originally on a secret rite.⁷³

It is interesting how the theme of milk is developed in Gnostic texts: "I have formed their members / and offered them my nipples / so that they might drink my sacred milk."⁷⁴ Here the theme of the motherhood of God, which we have already pointed out in Isaiah and Hosea, is enlarged and developed. Milk, for the Gnostic, therefore, represents the entire divine doctrine, the *logos*, therefore Christ Himself: "The Gnostic, like one who already finds himself to the right of the pleroma, drinks the milk, that is the Son (see Peter 2, 3: ei egeusasthe oti xrnstos o xurios), which has been squeezed from the breast of the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit."⁷⁵

The fathers of the church, beginning with Ireneus and Clement of Alexandria, eagerly picked up again the theme of the "milk" of doctrine, or more exactly, of the Word of God.

It is within this context that one can begin to give a cultural explanation of the bizarre dream of Clare. There are still, however, references that are more direct and closer to her. One of these might seem to be

⁶⁸ It suffices to recall Romulus and Remus nursed by the wolf.

⁶⁹ See A. Di Nola, in *Encic. delle rel.*, s.v. "Grecia, religioni della."

⁷⁰ Ex 3:8.

⁷¹ Joel 1:23.

⁷² 1 Pet. 2:2.

⁷³ H. Schlier, *Grande Lessico del Nuovo Testamento*, s.v. "Gala" (milk).

⁷⁴ Song of Solomon 8:16. This, as well as the next quote, is treated by Schlier (cited in n. 73 above).

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 19:1—5.

that legend of the nursing of St. Bernard. According to it, while the saint was praying before a statue of the madonna, who is nursing the Infant, at the moment when he [St. Bernard] pronounced the words "Show yourself to be a mother," the statue became alive and the Virgin, pressing her bosom, let fall on his lips some drops of milk. There is a question, however, of a hagiographic incident that is not attested to in any text before the fourteenth century. It would be interesting to be able to retrace the origins of a similar story in popular devotion and culture, especially because similar incidents were attributed subsequently to St. Augustine, Fulbert of Charters, St. Dominic, Alain de la Roche, and St. Catherine of Ricci. However, at the present state of research it is impossible to say if it was already widespread, at least in oral accounts, in the thirteenth century.⁷⁶

Other references come, however, from Franciscan tradition. According to Thomas of Celano, Francis called Christmas the feast of feasts because it was "the day on which God, having become a tiny infant, clung to human breasts."⁷⁷ After Francis's death, popular piety considered him a protector of motherhood and of nursing. In the *Treatise on Miracles*, Celano devotes an entire chapter to women freed from the dangers of childbirth, and relates a miracle which seems especially significant for the interpretation of our vision:

In the diocese of Magliano Sabino lived an eighty-year-old woman who had two daughters. One of them died. To her surviving daughter she entrusted the nursing of the son of her deceased daughter. However, this daughter conceived again, but she remained without milk. There was no one, therefore, who could come to the help of the orphaned baby. The child grew progressively weak. Both the baby and his grandmother seemed to be dying of sorrow.... One night, to calm the child's sobs, she took the baby's lips and pressed them to her withered breasts. Crying, she pleaded for the help of blessed Francis, the friend of innocent children. Suddenly that friend was at her side. Typical of the mercy he showed toward the unfortunate, he felt compassion for the old woman and said: "I am that Francis, O lady, whom you have been invoking with so many tears. [He continued:] Bring your breasts to the tender lips, because the Lord will give you abundant milk!"⁷⁸

After she had imbibed, that nipple (or the opening of the breast from which the milk came) remained between the lips of blessed Clare. She took into her hands what remained in her mouth, and it seemed to her that it was gold — so clear and bright that everything was seen in it as in a mirror.

⁷⁶L. Réau, *Inconographie de l'art chrétien* III, vol. 1, pp. 209—210.

⁷⁷2Cel 151.

⁷⁸3C3l 18

The dream ends with the word 'mirror'. This is a key word in the spirituality and culture of men of the Middle Ages.⁷⁹ In his systematic study on the theme of the mirror, H. Graber indicates more than 250 works in whose title the word 'mirror' appears (or its popular equivalent).⁸⁰

In particular, the symbol of the mirror seems to have found special popularity in circles of women religious throughout Europe, beginning with the twelfth century. Obviously we refer here above all to that *Speculum virginum*, whose influence on spiritual trends for six successive centuries is undoubted. But it was primarily in the German mystics and, in general, in northern Europe of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, that the image of the mirror found its definitive demonstration.

In Matilda of Magdeburg, a contemporary of Clare, the metaphor of the mirror serves to express the mystical union with God: "You are my mirror-on-high, the delight of my eyes... my deepest support."⁸¹ In her, the mirror-on-high indicates the relation of ecstasy beyond ordinary existence. And the expression "to look into the mirror of the deity" was very common in German mysticism to indicate mystic union.⁸²

It is difficult to establish with exactitude which ties and which relationships might have existed between the experience of Clare of Assisi and other contemporary religious women of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Certainly, the ecstatic experience of the Lady of Assisi appears much more modest if one takes into account that the dream being examined in this study is practically the only one of Clare for which we have detailed information.

The analysis conducted so far allows insight into how Clare's mystical and spiritual experience deeply sinks its roots in a culture, if not directly influenced by, certainly akin to that of so many other religious women of the thirteenth century.

And so how can one not connect this last image of the mirror, in which Clare, at the top of the stairway where she has been nursed by Francis, sees her own image, to that mirror-on-high which in Matilda indicates mystical nuptials?

⁷⁹ Margot Schmidt, in *Dict. de spiritualité*, s.v. "Miroir."

⁸⁰ *Speculum, Mirror und Looking-Glass: Kontinuität und Originalität der Spiegelmetapher in den Buchtiteln des Mittelalters und der englischen Litteratur des 13. bis 17. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen, 1973).

⁸¹ *Fließende Licht der Gottheit*, vol. 1, p. 20.

⁸² See Schmidt, in *Dict. de spiritualité*, cited in n. 79 above.

Clare probably represents a minor expression (according to a general measure of cultural valuation) of a movement of feminine spirituality that preceded her and lived on after her. And yet in this movement she is a moment and a point of reference that cannot be eliminated, whose originality, although not repeatable, will not remain without influence.

The originality of Clare's spirituality, which is also the originality of our dream, then is in that eccentric element that we have already pointed out. The fire at the center, to which the whole vision converges, is Francis.

The totally human love of Clare for Francis, which this dream places so well in high relief, characterizes to a great degree her love of God. Her spirituality, uses as a real and personal trans-significance of traditional symbols of the love of God, using them as symbols of her love of Francis. This love does not render less pure the love Clare has for the Lord. Just as for Matilda, for Clare, too, the Lord is her deepest support. For Clare, however, Francis is the concrete channel by which she has known and loved God, so that in her *Testament* she can say that Francis "was our pillar [of strength] and, after God, our one consolation and support" (*columna nostra, unica consolation post Deum et firmitermentum*).⁸³ It is this human love that permits Clare to flee the dangers of an excessive exaltation of religious ecstasy, typical (on the contrary) of other religious experiences such as the *minnemystik*, or, to give an example closer to Clare, Angela da Foligno.⁸⁴

⁸³*TestCl* 38.

⁸⁴To grasp the exact balance of Clare's spirituality, it will be useful to place it face to face with an event in the life of Angela of Foligno, related by her in the *Libro*, where we find the same details (washing of feet, eating, etc.) as those in our vision: "One Holy Thursday I told my companion to go with me in search of Christ: 'Let us go to the hospital and you will see that perhaps we shall find Christ among the poor, burdened with a thousand pains and afflictions.' ...We distributed everything to the poor, we washed the women's feet, the men's hands, and in particular those of a leper whose members were so putrefied and rotted that the flesh was falling in bits and pieces, and then we drank the bath water. At that time we experienced a very special sweetness.... In fact, I had the feeling of having received Communion, because I felt that immense happiness as of having received the Lord. And since a bit of that wounded flesh had remained stuck in my throat, I forced myself to swallow it, and I felt my conscience stopping me from spitting it out. It was as though I had been communicated by truth. I did not wish to discharge it by vomiting, but only to clear it from my throat" (*Il Libro*, p. 89).

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