Mother, Sister, Bride: The Spirituality of St. Clare

Marianne Schlosser

"Mutter, Schwester, Braut: Zur Spiritualität der hl. Klara" *Laurentianum* 31 (1990): 176–97

Translated by Ignatius McCormick, O.F.M.Cap.

If we want to seek out what was uniquely feminine in St. Clare we might try any of several approaches.¹ In the present study we shall concentrate mainly on the testimony of witnesses interviewed in the process of canonization, and the interpretation of her life and personality in other ecclesiastical documents.² We shall also rely on such private sources as the letters of Pope Gregory IX,³ and on later commentaries on her life and personality, such as St. Bonaventure's letters to the Poor Ladies.⁴ Our principal resource, however, will be the writings of Clare herself: How does she view herself and her sisters? We shall see her in her triple role of mother, sister and bride.⁵ The three roles are reminiscent of the words Francis addressed to the faithful, urging them to become the mothers, spouses and brothers of Christ⁶ Clare, too, uses the three titles to depict the soul's relationship to Christ. To be His mother, sister and spouse implies a certain relationship to the Son of

¹ For example, one could undertake a study of language and imagery. See Claire d'Assise, *Ecrits*, eds. Becker, Godet and Matura (Paris, 1985), Sources Chrétiennes, vol. 325; Introduction (Thadée Matura), pp. 33, 51. Or one could concentrate primarily on the accounts of her life, among which *Proc* is the best source.

accounts of her life, among which Proc is the best source. 2Bull authorizing the institution of the process of canonization: $Gloriosus\ Deus$, and the $Bull\ of\ Canonization$.

³ Kajetan Esser, "Die Briefe Gregors IX. an die hl. Klara von Assisi," Franziskanische Studien 35 (1953): 274–95.

⁴ Bonaventure, De perfectione vitae ad sorores (Opera omnia VIII 107-27), sent to the Poor Ladies from Longchamp, near Paris. See Epistola VII to the convent in Assisi (Op. omn., VIII 473-74).

⁵ Sister Marie Aimée of Christ, O.S.C., also holds this threefold vocation to be a fundamental concept. See "The Charisms of St. Clare: A Prophecy for Women of Every Age," in *Greyfriars Review* 1 (1987): 77–91, originally in *Laurentianum* 26: 1985): 865–82. Other feminine terms like maid-servant, daughter, and Lady, modify or enlarge upon these titles and as such must be taken into consideration. Clare's self-description as "the little plant" of Francis should be the topic of a separate monograph.

⁶ 1EpFid I 7–10; 2EpFid 50–53.

God based primarily on the mystery of the Incarnation. Unlike such words as 'daughter' or 'handmaiden', they are titles of royalty.

A relationship to Christ as the Word-made-flesh also defines one's relationship to all the members of His body. This is particularly true for motherhood and sisterhood. For one can be a mother or sister to any number of persons, but a bride to only one. Nevertheless, espousals to Christ also influences our relationship to our fellow human beings. It clothes it with a certain luster, as we hope to demonstrate.

The Bull of Canonization presents the three titles on a horizontal plane. Clare is mother because she is a daughter of the church, which is fertile, which nourishes, fosters, guides and teaches. She is sister to all on account of the universal calling they share. She is their companion and guide as they journey through life. All this entails solidarity and mutual sharing. As the bride of Christ she is fountain of joy and a bright beacon of hope for all her fellow men.

1. Mother

Francis spoke of his friars as 'mothers'. We need only recall his use of the term in the *Rule for Hermitages*, and in his admonition that the brothers make known their needs to one another and support one another. These words may have been based on 1 Thessalonians 2: 7. Clare quotes Francis almost literally in her own *Rule*: For if a mother loves and nourishes her daughter according to the flesh, should not a sister love and nourish her sister according to the Spirit even more lovingly?"

Although Francis often likens himself to a mother, 12 he never calls himself 'father'. He may have been influenced by the Gospel warning not to call anyone on earth father. Clare, however, frequently called

⁷See 3LAg 8.

⁸Verse 19: "Therefore, let mother-church rejoice because she had begotten and reared such a daughter, who, as a parent fruitful with virtues, has produced many daughters for religious life by her example and has trained them for the perfect service of Christ by her thorough teaching. Let the devout multitude of the faithful be glad, because the king and Lord of heaven has chosen their sister and companion as His spouse and has introduced her with glory to His lofty and brilliant palace."

⁹RegEr 1-2, 4, 8-10.

¹⁰ RegB VI 8; RegNB IX 11.

¹¹RCl VIII 16. Again in TestCl 66. The use of inclusive language is especially remarkable in BCl 9–13: "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.... The Father of mercies has and does bless His sons and daughters in heaven and on earth." [Translations from the writings of Clare and concerning Clare are taken from Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M.Cap., ed. and trans., Clare of Assisi: Early Documents (Paulist Press: New York and Mahwah, 1988), used by permission of Paulist Press. — Editor.

¹²EpLeo.

Francis 'father'. Another consideration is the fact that 'mother' is not simply the feminine counterpart of father, as 'servant girl' is to 'manservant', but is replete with other nuances. In Francis's Letter to Brother Leo it conveys the idea of a certain security, understanding and loving care.

Clare calls herself 'mother' instead of 'abbess'. In doing so she restores the office of abbess to its deepest and original meaning. The title 'abbess' is found only in the *Rule*. Elsewhere Clare prefers to refer to herself as one who is completely at the disposal of her sisters. A She chooses non-legalistic titles like 'mother', 'servant', and 'handmaid'. Scholars maintain that it was not humility as such that motivated her reluctance to use the title of abbess. For one thing she didn't want to project a Benedictine image. Apart from that, we get the feeling that her colorful descriptions of her role are more expressive than any legal phrases.

Clare was a woman who did not find it easy to issue orders. According to witnesses at the process of canonization, Francis had to order her to undertake the leadership of the sisters' community. If she had to assign some task, she did it with great shyness and humility. She would have preferred to do it herself In fact she habitually reserved the lowliest and most unpleasant tasks for herself. The *Bull of Canonization* makes explicit reference to this trait: "She would rather serve than command" (v. 10).

Unlike Francis, she rarely gave orders in obedience. Among the evangelical counsels she set humility above obedience. In a number of

¹³ A. Lagier, "In der Schule des Gebetes bei Klara von Assisi," in Klara von Assisi, Studientagung der FAG 1980, ed. L. Hardick and E. Häcker (Wandlung in Treue, 23, Werl, 1980), pp. 64–92 (here p. 83). See Sister M. Aimée of Christ, "The Charism of St. Clare" cited in n. 5 above.

¹⁴ TestCl 61. 'Office' is to be understood as 'duty' or 'service'.

¹⁵ See Clare, Ecrits, Introd., p. 45.

¹⁶ E.g. Engelbert Grau, O.F.M., FrQuSchr 2 (1953), note to 1Cel 29–31. See also Lázaro Iriarte, O.F.M.Cap., "Clare of Assisi: Her Place in Female Hagiography," Greyfriars Review 3 (1989): 173–206 (here pp. 180–82), originally in Lau 29 (1988): 416–61.

¹⁷ In line with this, she does not speak of a Rule for the sisters but of a forma vivendi ("form of life"). Her terminology was not only the result of the prescription of the Fourth Lateran Council forbidding any new religious Rules. She is also reflecting the formula vitae she received from Francis. See Claire, Ecrits, Introd., p. 41. A "rule" connotes something objective, a plumb-line we can grasp, whereas a "way of life" implies an interior attitude toward life that is actualized in daily living. If we compare the Rule of St. Clare with the Constitutions of Hugolino (Bull. Franc., vol. 1, 263–67, 494–99), or with the Constitutions of the early Dominican Nuns of 1250 (Les Constitutions primitives des seours dominicaines de Montargis [1250], ed. R. Creytens, Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum 17 [1947]: 41–84), we can easily detect a certain spiritual freedom and realism in her regulations regarding the enclosure, silence and punishment for greater or lesser transgressions.

passages of her *Rule*, she quotes Francis.¹⁸ She clarifies the renunciation of one's own will with a quotation from the Poverello: "Therefore I want them to obey their mother of their own free will as they have promised the Lord" (*TestCL* 68).

Twice (in the *Rule IV 9* and *Testament 62*) she asks that obedience be given "more out of love than out of fear." Her attitude toward obedience radiates the same atmosphere of familiarity as her preference for the title of mother over that of abbess.

Together with the humility of a mother, ¹⁹ the virtues of kindness and compassion recur frequently in the process. Especially compassion is closely associated with motherhood. ²⁰ The requirement of the *Testament 4*, 9—that the abbess-mother must be a shelter and consolation for all who are afflicted, that they must find in her "the means of health"—is no abstract ideal but an essential element of Clare's daily life. She embodied the concern and kindness that she urged on her successor in the *Testament 63 65*. The superior is to be *provida* ('caring, concerned', *discreta* ('discreet'), *benigna* ('kind'), *communis* ('familiar, friendly') and never cold or unapproachable. ²¹ The mother is to have a special concern for the sick members. She should serve them in person before any of the other sisters. ²² A great number of witnesses testified that Clare used every possible means to alleviate the sufferings of the sick sisters.

Most of the miracles attributed to Clare were for the benefit and healing of others. They expressed her readiness to be "the means of healing" for her sisters. This willingness to help is closely bound up with the virtue of compassion (a "suffering-with"). Taking another's suffering upon oneself and a readiness to be of help is closely associated with the concept of enduring some pain oneself, to pay the price in one's own person.²³

¹⁸ RCl I 2-5; X 3; RegB I 1-3; X 2-3.

¹⁹ Proc II 6: "She also said she used such rough haircloths and shirts for herself but was very merciful to the sisters who could not endure such harshness and willingly gave them consolation." Another said (IV 18): "She loved the sisters as herself" (see also XIII 3). Her instructions were gentle and considerate, her reprimands discreet (see VI 4). See esp. VIII 3; XII 6-7; XIV 4; XV 1. See also the Bull of Canonization, v. 14.

esp. VIII 3; XII 6-7; XIV 4; XV 1. See also the *Bull of Canonization*, v. 14.

²⁰ See esp. *Proc* I 12: "The blessed mother was humble, kind, and loving to her sisters, and had compassion for the sick. While she was healthy, she served them and washed their feet and gave them water with her own hands." Bonaventure, too, writes that one becomes the mother of Christ through the practice of mercy (*Op. omn.* IX 213a, *Sermo in Feria IV p. Dom. I in Quadragesima*).

²¹ See *TestCl* 64: "To provide for the needs of each."

 $^{^{22}}$ See RCl VIII 7.

²³ We must keep in mind that these healings were brought about by a woman who was seriously ill herself, and that she effected them through the sign of the cross. The cures were not only performed to help others but to express a radical following of the Crucified

The duty of caring for the sick (infirmi—RCl IV 9) is not limited to illness of the body. It extends to spiritual infirmities as well, which can lead to depression. For those who suffer in mind, too, the mother must be available for guidance, sympathy and support. Clare is not thinking only of her sisters. Otherwise the masculine form infirmi would be meaningless. Her letters to Agnes of Prague furnish the most convincing evidence that her motherly concern was not limited to her own community. The process also bears this out. Cardinal Raynaldo was not mouthing some flowery compliment when he greeted her as his "mother and daughter in Christ." Cardinal Hugolino for his part does not hesitate to call her mater salutis suae ("Mother of his salvation") in that touching letter Ab illa hora of 1220. He professes unbounded trust in her intercessory prayer.

Clare drew the strength to lead a life of motherly love from an image of God marked by profound trust. The words which she addressed "to her soul" shortly before her death need no commentary: "Go calmly in peace, for you will have a good escort, because He Who created you has sent you the Holy Spirit and has always guarded you as a mother does her child who loves her." To be a mother to others is to imitate God Himself Who cares for us like a loving mother.

On the other hand there is no great emphasis placed on her being "the mother of Christ." And we find no special devotion to the childhood of Jesus in her writings. ²⁸ The Christmas experience she had shortly before her death was a sense of unity with the friars as they celebrated the liturgy of the Word-made-flesh — not some internal encounter with the Christ child. We hear of such visions only for two of her sisters, whom Clare saw with the Child Jesus, ²⁹

She writes in the *Rule* II 24: "I admonish, beg, and exhort my sisters to always wear cheap garments out of love of the most holy and beloved Child Who was wrapped in such poor little swaddling clothes and laid in a manger and of His most holy mother."

The exhortation to be content with few articles of clothing is a quotation from the Later Rule II 16. But unlike Francis, who adds:

⁽see Isaiah 53: 4).

²⁴ In 3LAg 38-41 Clare expresses her maternal solicitude when she begs Agnes not to go to excess in the practice of austerity. In 4LAg 35, written shortly before she died, Clare assures Agnes of her deep affection (affectus maternus): "Let the tongue of the flesh be silent when I seek to express my love for you; and let the tongue of the Spirit speak."

²⁵ See the confirmation of the *Rule* of St. Clare: "Raynaldus, by the mercy of God Bishop of Ostia and Velletri, to our dear beloved mother and daughter in Christ..."

²⁶ Esser, "Die Briefe Gregors IX," p. 277, cited in n. 3 above.

²⁷ Proc III 20; XI 3.

²⁸ A. Lagier thinks otherwise. See Klara von Assisi, pp. 78–79, cited in n. 13 above.

²⁹ Proc IX 4, 10; X 8.

"They shall not look down on others," Clare beseeches her sisters (deprecor is not used by Francis) to let contemplation lead to imitation. Clare concentrates her attention on the poverty of Christ as His birth, His acceptance of poverty in order to enrich us, 30 and not on His infancy as such. She views His coming into the world as a little child to be an expression of poverty and humility: "As the glorious Virgin of virgins carried [Him] materially, so you, too, by following in her footprints, especially those of poverty and humility, can, without any doubt, always carry Him spiritually in your chaste and virginal body, holding Him by Whom you and all things are held together, possessing that which, in comparison with the other transitory possessions of this world, you will possess more securely."

We resemble the mother of Christ only to the extent that we embrace poverty and lowliness out of love for Christ. Interestingly, Clare mentions the imitation of Mary more frequently than Francis speaks of the imitation of Christ. However, Mary is a model not because she is mother but rather as the associate of Christ in His poverty and humility. Mary is the imitator of Christ par excellence. She is especially so as the mater dolorosa, the sorrowful mother. But this image leads directly to her glorious coronation, as Francis puts it in his Canticle of Exhortation: "Each one [of you] will be crowned queen in heaven with the Virgin Mary" (v. 6).

2. Sister

Spiritual motherhood has two basic characteristics. The first is humility, through which the mother is also a servant. The second is the fact that she is also a sister and companion. These two qualities shield motherhood from such negative images as that of a domineering and overprotective woman. We would look in vain among Clare's writings for any such authoritarian note. Even when she gets up during the night to tuck in her sisters against the cold, she does it in a quiet, unobtrusive way. When she gives advice to Agnes of Prague about fasting, she does it tenderly and in low key, calling upon her to use her own common sense.

³⁰ 1LAg 19–20 (laudabile commercium).

³¹ 3LAg 24-26.

³² Lothar Hardick, O.F.M., FrQuSchr 2 (1953): 161. See Engelbert Grau, O.F.M.: "Umfange als arme Jungfrau den armen Christus," in Klara von Assisi, p. 124 (Stellenangaben), cited in n. 13 above. See also Matura, Ecrits, pp. 59-60, cited in n. 1 above.

³³ RCl VI 7; VIII 6; XII 11. See 1LAg 24: "Sister of the glorious Virgin." See also 3LAg 24-25: "Love for Mary."

³⁴ LEr 12.

³⁵ Proc I 3.

The title of 'sister' was more important for Clare than 'mother', and she makes use of it to put herself on the same level as the rest of the community. As the Bull of Canonization states, she became the companion of all the faithful. Equality and sharing, a willingness to put oneself in another's place — all are inseparable from being 'sister'.

Clare's view of herself as sister is not merely an expression of humility. The Rule itself stresses the equality of the nuns. We can rightly speak of a democratization that we can appreciate today only if we recall the monastic structure prevalent in her time. 36 Compared to Clare's democratization, even Francis's concept of the superiors as ministers (servants) sounds monarchic, as Thadée Matura observes.³⁷

At that time, it was not taken for granted that Francis and Clare would make no distinction between lay nun and choir nun, rich and poor, learned and illiterate, nobles and commoners.38 Just as the Rule of the early Dominican nuns spoke of the conversae ('lay members') in contrast to the 'nuns', 39 Clare speaks of sisters who serve outside the enclosure (RCl IX 11). It is said that she rarely associated with them. 40 But the lay sisters were not there to serve her. She washed and even kissed their feet, in an obvious imitation of Christ.41 The lay sisters, like the nuns, were called to continual contemplation and praise of God.

Clare recognized the personal responsibility of each sister. She writes that they could leave the enclosure "for a useful, reasonable, evident, and approved purpose" (RCl II 12).42 The rules for silence reflect the same broadmindedness and trust. Talking was always per-

³⁶ See Matura, Ecrits, pp. 46–47. See "Some Reflections on the Personality of St. Clare," Greyfriars Review 2 (1988): 57-62 (here p. 59). For historical background see Jean Leclercq, O.S.B., "Il monachesimo femminile nei secoli XII e XIII," in "Movimento religioso femminile e francescanesimo nel secolo XIII," Atti del VII Convegno internazionale Assisi, 11-13 ottobre 1979 (Assisi, 1980), pp. 61-99. Degler-Spengler, "Die religiöse Frauenbewegung des Mitelalters," in Rottenburger Jahrbuch für Kirchengeschichte 3 (1984): 75-88. See also Marie Aimée of Christ, "The Charism of St. Clare," pp. 81-82.

³⁷ *Ecrits*, pp. 46–47, cited in n. 1 above.

³⁸ Iriarte, "Clare of Assisi," p. 180, cited in n. 16 above.

³⁹Chap 25, "De conversis" (Creytens, Les Constitutions primitives, p. 81, cited in n. 17 above). The two groups of religious wore different habits and followed a different prayer schedule.

⁴⁰The Constitutions of Hugolino distinguish between dominae ('Ladies') and servientes ('servants'). See Bull. Franc., vol. 1, 264. Proc 41 uses the term servitiale ('servile').

⁴¹ Proc III 9. See VI 2.

⁴²RCl II 12. Compare this with chapter 26 of the Constitutions of the early Dominican nuns (Creytens, Les Constitutions primitives, p. 81-82, cited in n. 17 above): "We forbid under pain of anathema any sisters, for whatever reason or purpose, to leave the area assigned to them, except for the purpose of establishing or building new foundatons or of reforming some monastery." Then follow many regulations for those who are permitted to leave the monastery, as well as restricitons for entrance into the enclosure.

mitted in the infirmary ($RCl\ V\ 3$). The sisters could also "communicate always and everywhere, briefly and in a low tone of voice, whatever is necessary" ($RCl\ V\ 4$). They could make use of the articles they needed ($RCl\ VIII\ 10$). If a sister was presented with some gift, the superior should let her have it (faciat illi dari — $RCl\ VIII\ 9$). She might keep it for herself or give it in turn to another sister who had greater need of it. The $Rule\$ of St. Benedict⁴³ places the disposal of gifts in the hands of the abbot. Was Clare's liberal attitude based on an over-optimistic view of human nature?⁴⁴ At any rate, her role as sister precluded any patronizing behavior and encouraged a sense of individual responsibility in the community.

All her counsels and regulations had another goal in mind: the promotion of harmony among the sisters — a certain esprit de corps that is indispensable for a contemplative community.⁴⁵ It is not just a question of leading a common life in close quarters. It goes to the very heart of the contemplative vocation. Wherever unity and mutual charity (mutua caritas) is lacking, prayer languishes, not only in the individual religious but in the community as a whole.⁴⁶

Prayer for one another is the primary and deepest expression of that mutual support that is an essential element of sisterhood. The nuns were to intercede for one another as sisters of Christ, Who on His part became a brother to all, and as high priest chosen from among men, interceded for all His brothers and sisters.

The religious are sisters of Christ when they do Christ's work for the benefit of others — when they act as bridges between God and humanity. To pray for one another is "to carry each other's burden of charity [and] in this way ... easily fulfill the law of Christ." This solidarity encompassed in the first place the sisters living in the community; then the brothers of the First Order, and finally all the members of the church. There is a mysterious life shared by all through the ineffable love of Christ, so that the needs of each can and must be supplied by the others. In this way the sisters of Christ should be the "co-

⁴³Chap. 54, vv. 2–3.

⁴⁴ Matura, Ecrits, p. 50.

⁴⁵ See *TestCl* 59–60: "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." ⁴⁶ *RCl* II 7; IX 7–9.

⁴⁷ LEr 17.

⁴⁸ See Esser, "Die Briefe Gregors IX," pp. 274-95. See pp. 293-95, where Clare's relationship to the church is brought out in its apostolic and vicarious dimensions.

⁴⁹ In 3LAg 8 the word *ineffabilis* also connotes 'holiest', 'mysterious', and in this context 'mystical'.

⁵⁰ Ibid: "...to supply the defect."

worker(s) of God Himself and a support of the weak members of His ineffable body." Francis, too, was keenly aware of this dimension of community life. 52

In his Major Life, Bonaventure relates an incident that illustrates the sisterly relationship of Clare to Francis. The Poverello was debating whether he should pursue a purely contemplative life or devote himself to a missionary and apostolic career. He asked Brother Sylvester and Clare for advice. Both replied that it was God's will for him to carry out his apostolic ministry. In her Testament, Clare states that Francis, before he had brothers, had already uttered the famous prophecy about the Ladies of San Damiano. He had spiritual sisters before he had brothers. 4

The following passage from Clare's *Testament* shows how the vocation of the sisters was to be 'mirrors' for men and women living in the world, as well as for the sisters, who chose religious life at San Damiano: "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

⁵¹ 3LAg 8: "To use the words of the apostle himself in their proper sense, I consider you a co-worker of God Himself and the support of the weak members of His ineffable body." ⁵² According to Oktavian Schmucki, O.F.M.Cap., in "The Rediscovery of the Canticle of Exhortation of St. Francis for the Poor Ladies of San Damiano," Greyfriars Review 3 (1989): 115–26, we must assume that a letter accompanied the recently discovered exhortation Audite poverelle. Its content must be conjectured from the Legend of the

Three Companions. In that case, it must have stressed the two aspects of caritas among the sisters and their obligation to put themselves in the place of others.

⁵³ LMaior XII 2: "Choosing, therefore, two of the friars, he sent them to Brother Silvester — who had seen the cross coming out from his mouth, and who in those days had spent his time in continuous prayer on the mountain above Assisi — that Silvester might ask God to resolve his doubt over this matter and send him the answer in God's name. He also asked the holy virgin Clare to consult with the purest and simplest of the virgins living under her Rule in order to seek the Lord's will in this matter." [Translation from Ewart Cousins, trans., The Life of St. Francis ("Legenda maior"), Classics of Western Spirituality, Paulist Press (New York, Ramsey and Toronto, 1978), used by permission of Paulist Press. — Editor]

⁵⁴ TestCl 9-14: "In fact, 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 abandon the world completely, 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 throughout His holy, universal church by their celebrated and holy manner of life." See also Margaret Carney, O.S.F., "A Critical Examination of the Sources," Greyfriars Review 3 (1989): 315-43 (originally in Lau 30 (1989): 25-60.

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."

To be a mirror means to reflect an image that others can appropriate and even incorporate in themselves. The whole life-style of the sisters, living in this world as pilgrims and strangers, bears witness as to the futility of building a permanent dwelling place here below. Their life of witnessing is not only a following of Christ but precisely as following and imitating the Lord it takes on a distinctive missionary and apostolic dimension. The call to a life that is both contemplative and apostolic is found in Clare as well as in Francis, though realized in different ways.

The testimony given by her sisters at the process of canonization shows how much she longed for a life of heroic witnessing.⁵⁷ When she learned of the martyrdom of the friars in Morocco, she expressed a wish to go there too.⁵⁸ The deepest motive for her desire to give witness was the love she had for the One to be witnessed. Her longing for martyrdom was inseparable from her love for the Crucified.

3. Bride

The concept of mother leads naturally to that of bride. Here we are face-to-face with the heart of Clare's spirituality. In her *Letters* to Agnes of Prague, she opens her heart as 'spiritual mother' (*mater spiritualis*) and addresses the recipient twice as 'mother of Christ', three times as 'sister', and seven times as 'bride'. ⁵⁹

Although Clare was indebted to Francis for the concept of marriage with Christ, the Poverello himself was rather restrained in expressing it. ⁶⁰ In Francis's writings, Christ is called 'bridegroom'. The faithful are called the 'betrothed of Christ' twice, but in the unusual masculine form: *sponsi*. ⁶¹ In her *Rule* VI 3 Clare calls her sisters 'brides', but brides of the Holy Spirit, a clear parallel with the role of the Virgin

⁵⁵ TestCl 19–22.

⁵⁶See the *Bull of Canonization*, v. 4: "Moreover, since in the austerity of her cloistered solitude, she broke the alabaster jar of her body with her severity, the whole church was thoroughly imbued with the aroma of her sanctity."

⁵⁷ Proc VI 6; VII 2; XII 6.

⁵⁸ The sisters who knew her did not take this desire as an idle dream but as a serious wish. Otherwise the witness would not have wept over it.

 $^{^{59}}$ Ecrits, p. 55. The title of bride appears in all four Letters.

⁶⁰ See also Carney, "A Critical Examination of the Sources," p. 323, n. 30., cited in n. 54 above.

⁶¹ IEpFid I 7-8, 12; 2EpFid 50-51, 55. Did Francis find it difficult to use the title 'bride' with reference to men because of its definite female connotation? That would be understandable, since a woman by her very nature can represent a bride better than a man, even though both men and women can be a spiritual bride with equal intensity.

Mary. 62 Thadée Matura writes: "Here we have a basic question. According to Francis, the fundamental Christian experience is that of the triune God; for Clare it is a nuptial union with Christ. Francis of course did not neglect this aspect (2EpFid 50-51), but he did not enlarge on it. For him it was of secondary significance."

Matura then notes that Clare drew upon certain books of Scripture that Francis hardly ever quoted, specifically the Song of Solomon, Job, and Psalm 45, which celebrates a royal wedding. The poetic passages in her *Letters* to Agnes of Prague seem to have been inspired to a great extent by liturgical language. Matura cites some verses from the *Office* of the Assumption and the Annunciation, and especially texts from the liturgy for the feast of St. Agnes, celebrated on January 21. The latter is replete with references of a bridal-mystical character.

We can readily understand why the Letters to Agnes of Prague are interspersed with texts from the Office of her patron saint, St. Agnes, virgin and martyr. We might remember that monasteries that followed the Rule of St. Clare practiced the custom of consecration of virgins. According to regulations harking back to the Constitutions of Hugolino, there were two occasions when the bishop was allowed to enter the cloister. One was for the blessing of a new abbess, and the other was for the solemn consecration of a nun. The principal part of the rite was a prayer of consecration modeled on the Preface of the Mass: Deus castorum corporum. It dates back to the days of Pope Leo the Great, and in the course of time incorporated a number of texts inspired by the Office for the feast of St. Agnes.

The well-known antiphon: "I am espoused to Him Whom the angels serve, Whose beauty the sun and moon admire," is quoted freely by Clare in her third and fourth Letter to Agnes of Prague⁶⁹ and is found in the tenth-century Pontificale Romano-Germanicum. Since then there have been only minor variations in the rite of velatio virginum ("the

⁶² See Optatus van Asseldonk, "The Holy Spirit in the Writings and Life of St. Clare," Greyfriars Review 1 (1987): 93–104; Oktavian Schmucki, "Mysticism of St. Francis in the Light of His Writings," Greyfriars Review 3, no. 3 (1989): 241–66 (originally in Kurt Ruh, ed., "Abendländische Mystik im Mittelalter," (Stuttgart, 1986), pp. 269–85 (here pp. 252ff).

⁶³ Ecrits, Introd., p. 64.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p.34.

⁶⁵ 2LAg 5; 3LAg 17–18.

⁶⁶ 1LAg 8, 10–11; 3LAg 16.

⁶⁷ RCl XI 9. Hugolino: see Bull. Franc., vol. 1, 266.

⁶⁸The rite is contained in the Sacramentarium Veronense, dating from the fifth to sixth century. For a history of the rite see I. Calabuig and R. Barbieri, Nuovo dizionario di liturgia, s.v. "Consacrazione delle vergini."

⁶⁹ 3LAg 16; 4LAg 8, 10.

taking of the veil") or consecratio | benedictio monalium ("the consecration or blessing of nuns"). The rite celebrated a desponsatio cum Christo ("espousals with Christ") and lent a certain drama to the otherwise legalistic form of the profession ceremony. It fell into disuse in the Late Middle Ages and was replaced by the rite of solemn or final profession. During the High Middle Ages the liturgy of consecration was used especially by the Cistercian Nuns. Gertrude of Helfta wrote some meditations based on it. The first Dominican nuns also practiced it. Would not be wrong to suppose that Clare's spirituality, too, was nourished by these liturgical texts, since she knew Latin very well. We can detect a certain affinity to Cistercian spirituality in her writings.

The modern mind finds little difficulty with the titles of mother and sister. But we find it strange to see a life dedicated to God as that of a bride. The reason may lie in the fact that over the years a good deal of cloying sentimentality has obscured the deepest sense of the word, which implies a sharing of one's destiny with a life-companion, and unconditional love and fidelity. We might ask whether the misunderstanding has even deeper roots. Bridal love is sometimes thought to lack specific goals. In fact it is a dedicated and all-embracing love (soli Deo vivere), which must precede and accompany any specific application in works of charity or the apostolate.

More than the others, the title of 'bride' is one of nobility. If Clare and her sisters are addressed as 'Ladies', it is because they received this rank from their 'Lord', who accepted their love in an indissoluble bond. Gregory IX wrote to the nuns: "My very special daughters, and, if I may say so, Ladies, since you are the brides of the Lord." Francis too seems to have used the title for the same reason, rather than merely out of courtesy. Clare expresses the meaning in her Second Letter to St.

⁷⁰The editon used in Clare's time must have been the one in the Pontificale Romanae Curiae, published in the thirteenth century.

⁷¹Gertrude d'Helfta, Oeuvres spirituelles, vol. 1, ed. J. Hourlier and A. Schmitt (Paris, 1967), Sources Chrétiennes, vol. 127: "Exercitium desponsationis et consecrationis," pp. 92–123.

⁷² Chap. 15 (Creytens, Les Constitutions primitives, p. 76, cited in n. 17 above): "When it seems expedient to the master of the order or the prior-provincial or his vicar and the prioress, they may have them blessed by the bishop."

⁷³ Engelbert Grau, O.F.M., "Die Schriften der hl. Klara und die Werke ihrer Biographen," in *Klara von Assisi*, p. 22, cited in n. 13 above.

⁷⁴ See Matura, *Ecrits*, pp. 35 and 64. He refers to the bridal mysticism, the theme of the cross, and the symbol of the mirror.

⁷⁵ A. Lagier, "In der Schule des Gebetes," p. 82, cited in n. 13 above.

⁷⁶ See T. Schnitzler, Was das Stundengebet bedeutet (Freiburg, 1980), pp. 127–30.

 $^{^{77}\}mathrm{Second}$ letter. According to Kajetan Esser, it was not addressed specifically to San Damiano.

Agnes of Prague: "Most dear sister, yes, my Lady, because of the Lord, your spouse" (v. 24). She is 'sister' because she is the sister of Christ. She is 'Lady' because she is the bride of the king of heaven. ⁷⁹ Her intimate relationship to the Lord confers a special dignity on the sister. Yet she can never see herself on the same level. Even for the bride, He is always the Lord. ⁸⁰ As the bride of the Word-made-flesh, humble, Who laid down His life as the servant of God, she too must be a handmaiden, the servant of the Lord and of all members of His body. ⁸¹

Her humility draws its nourishment by contemplating the life of her spouse, with Whom she shares a common destiny. The bridegroom began and ended His life in poverty and humility. These two virtues do not consist merely in actual privation and lowliness, but in the whole-hearted acceptance of them. Humility, as a virtue, is a love of being lowly. True poverty is a love of a poor life. Christ manifested His ineffable love but on the cross through a total self-stripping and commitment. The three evangelical counsels can be summed up in poverty, humility and love. Love is the hub around which poverty and humility revolve. Or to put it another way, poverty and humility are love in action. Thomas of Celano is right when he writes that Clare longed to imitate the poverty of the Christ Child, to follow in the footsteps of the poor, crucified Savior, and to be conformed to Him so that nothing transitory could separate the lover from her beloved."

Poverty, service, and bearing the cross are not goals in themselves, but the expression of redemptive love. The Lord of the world entered the world poor, ⁸⁵ and was despised that we might become rich. When He despoiled Himself of His riches to become poor, He became one with all the poor, so that anyone who follows the poor Christ through a voluntary acceptance of poverty will share in His riches. In place of false wealth and honor, such a one will inherit eternal joy⁸⁶ as "sister, bride, and mother" of the Son, ⁸⁷ and strike a great bargain (laudabile commercium. ⁸⁸

⁷⁸ UltVol 2.

⁷⁹ 1LAg 12; 3LAg 1.

 $^{^{80}}$ 2LAg 1: "To the daughter of the king of kings, the servant of the Lord of lords, the most worthy spouse of Jesus Christ and therefore the most noble queen."

⁸¹ 3LAg 2; 1LAg 2, 4, 7. See also TestCl 79; BCl 6.

 $^{^{82}}$ 4LAg 22: Blessed poverty, holy humility, ineffable charity.

⁸³ Grau, O.F.M., "Umfange als arme Jungfrau den armen Christus," pp. 128–29, cited in n. 32 above.

⁸⁴ 1Cel 32–35.

⁸⁵ 1LAg 19–20.

⁸⁶ Ibid., vv. 22–23.

⁸⁷ Ibid., v. 24.

⁸⁸ For this train of thought see Engelbert Grau, O.F.M., "Das sacrum commercium sancti

The bride shares, as no one else can, the destiny of the bridegroom: "But as a poor virgin, embrace the poor Christ. Look upon Him Who became contemptible for you, and follow Him, making yourself contemptible in this world for Him.... Gaze upon your spouse; contemplate Him, as you desire to imitate Him. If you suffer with Him, you will reign with Him. If you weep with Him, you shall rejoice with Him. If you die with Him on the cross of tribulation, you shall possess heavenly mansions in the splendor of the saints."

Union with the bridegroom is expressed through the repeated use of 'with'. Compassion here is not limited to contemplative experience. The goal is not compassion as a stirring of the emotions but a transformation into the likeness of Christ by following His example. The acceptance of the cross in life according to the mind of Christ and in conformity with His love presupposes contemplation of the poor crucified Savior in the broader meaning of the term: "Place your mind before the mirror of eternity! Place your soul in the brilliance of glory. Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance. And transform your whole being into the image of the Godhead Itself through contemplation.... Love Him totally Who gave Himself totally for your love."

The trilogy — mind, soul, heart — is reminiscent of the great commandment of love: "You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, your whole soul, and with all your strength" (Deut. 6: 5). Love and contemplation of the beloved, Who first gave Himself without

reserve, effects spiritual transformation.

Since Christ's suffering on the cross is the visible manifestation of His love, Clare urges her sisters to be always mindful of the passion as a means of growing in the love of Christ. ⁹¹ It comes as no surprise to find that Clare had a special devotion to the passion, as we read in the acts of the process. She prayed intensely at Sext and None because she believed that these were the hours of His crucifixion. ⁹² As she lay dying, she uttered a prayer to the five holy wounds. ⁹³ Unfortunately, it has not been preserved. The almost total unawareness of her surroundings which Clare experienced on Good Friday and during part of the follow-

Francisci cum domina paupertate. Seine bedeutung für die franziskanische Mystik," in Kurt Ruh, ed., Abendländische Mystik, pp. 269–70, cited in n. 62 above.

⁸⁹ 2LAg 18-21. It is not clear why Matura (in *Ecrits*, p. 57, cited in n. 1 above) proposes the idea that the letters to Agnes stress a union with the king rather than with the "poor child" or the "man of sorrows." In fact, the central figure appears to be the crucified Christ. See 1LAg 12-14, 18; 2LAg 18-20.

⁹⁰ 3LAg 12–13, 15.

 $^{^{91}}LEr$ 9, 11–12; 4LAg 24–25. The testimony given at the process also makes reference to this admonition. See Proc XI 2.

⁹² Proc XI 3.

⁹³ Ibid., v. 10.

ing night94 was caused by her interior absorption in the mystery of the crucifixion.95 Her longing for martyrdom can also be explained by her wish to be made conformable to the Crucified. 6 Clare was to endure the martyrdom of protracted illness, just as Francis achieved martyrdom through his stigmatization. She accepted the cross of poor health with an awareness that it was a means of sharing, just as Christ took upon Himself the sufferings of others and won salvation for all.

"In the writings of St. Francis we find a somewhat tempered reference to love for the Crucified. We find in St. Clare a compassio - 'a suffering with', which blossoms like a rare bud." We get the impression that Clare and Bonaventure were kindred souls in accentuating the mystery of the cross and the mystical espousals associated with it. If Bonaventure read her writings, he read them very well.98 He devotes a long chapter "in memoria passionis Christi" in his work De perfectione vitae ad sorores. In a letter to the Ladies at San Damiano, he clearly connects the mystery of the cross with the mystery of espousals. Interestingly, he wrote it on La Verna at the time that he was writing his Soul's Journey into God. To have one's mind on nothing else but Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor. 2: 2), to follow after His fragrance (Song of Sol.1: 3) — here is the gist of Clare's teaching to her sisters.99 Bonaventure, too, clearly understood that through service and identification with the poor crucified Savior one becomes the bride not only of the poor Lord but of the eternal king: "To serve Christ, poor and crucified, as spouses of the eternal king." To be joined to the Crucified is to be joined to the king. To serve the king and to be espoused to Him is to serve the Crucified.

For all her preoccupation with the cross, Clare was nevertheless a woman who radiated joy. Again and again the witnesses at the process described traits that at first appear to be contradictory. Despite her

⁹⁴ Ibid., III 25.

 $^{^{95}}$ If we recall similar phenomena in the life of Catherine of Siena, we shall find Clare's almost total abstinence from food (the sisters wondered how she could survive) less an exercise of asceticism in the strict sense of the word than does the the Bull of Canonization (v. 15). Thomas of Celano points out that she must have been sustained by some internal power.

⁹⁷ Lagier, "In der Schule des Gebetes," p. 79, cited in n. 13 above.

⁹⁸ See also Matura, *Ecrits*, p. 59: "In some respects Clare has a greater affinity to St. Bonaventure and his spirituality than to Francis." A more thorough study of this spiritual relationship would prove fruitful and would further develop Sophronius Clasen's excellent contribution: "Franziskanische Christusbrautschaft. Die Stellung des hl. Bonaventura zum Orden der hl. Klara," FSien 35 (1953): 296-317. If we read Epistola VII we shall find that the language of the Itinerarium (igne accensae — 'set on fire') seems related to that of Clare (speculum — 'mirror', and exemplum — 'example'). ⁹⁹ *Ep*. VII.

austere life, she was always cheerful. She was capable of deep feeling and had the gift of tears, but she was never downcast. A sharing in the lot of the Crucified is a foretaste and anticipation of union with the Lord of glory. The focus is not on suffering but on love, a love that desires to share in the suffering of the beloved. Just as for Bonaventure, the cross is not black, but rather glowing red with love — a love that is resplendent with glory. It is only by sharing in His cross that one can achieve total solidarity with the beloved Lord and bridegroom.

With all its stern appeal to discipleship, the concept of espousals is charmingly fresh and stimulating. To be a bride means to have an ever youthful love, to be young at heart. 101 Clare's writings abound in joyfulness and imperturbable freshness. 102 Some witnesses at the process did not hesitate to say that Clare seemed like another Mary to them, as if she too had been sanctified from her mother's womb and preserved from original sin. 103 The Bull of Canonization makes reference to the mystery of redemption operative in Clare's nature, when it calls her "the new woman of the valley of Spoleto" (v. 11). The Bull speaks of her emanating a fragrance and a light (v. 15) — a felicitous thought that Bonaventure too chooses when he encourages the sisters to imitate their mother. 104

When we read Clare's writings, we must agree with Thadée Matura, who describes her personality as 'positive' and 'optimistic'. The frailty and weakness of human nature appear less apparent in her than in Francis. Her enthusiasm was not some transitory euphoria that could succumb to the temptation of overconfidence: 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." 107

¹⁰⁰ Proc XI 5; III 6; VI 4.

¹⁰¹ Even if the author of the Vitis mystica is not Bonaventure, he presents this aspect when he gives the reason why the faithful soul is called bride' rather than 'wife' (Op. omn. III 5): "Spouses usually love one another more ardently as newlyweds than later on in their married life.... And so our Spouse, to demonstrate the greatness of His love that never decreases with time, calls His beloved bride' because His love for her is ever youthful."

youthful."

102 We need only read the introduction of her third and fourth Letters to see how often she speaks of anything anythere (flow rejoice)

speaks of gaudium, gaudere ('joy, rejoice').

103 Proc XVII-XVIII. A number of witnesses compare Clare with Mary. Bonaventure, too, expresses the same thought when he compares Clare and Francis with Mary and Christ. It is surely no coincidence that Alexander of Hales said that his pupil Bonaventure seemed not to have sinned in Adam.

¹⁰⁴ Ep. VII.

¹⁰⁵ Ecrits, pp. 50, 52, 64, cited in n. 1 above.

¹⁰⁶ See TestCl 71-76; 3LAg 20.

^{107 2}LAg 12-13.

This joy is the sobria ebrietas ('sober intoxication') of which Bonaventure speaks. If we must fight, we must do so with stout hearts and without fear. 108 In her first letter to Agnes of Prague, Clare likens the spiritual life to a wrestling match. 109 She also speaks of spiritual espousals. A bride's love must never grow slack or fainthearted: "Draw me after you. We will run in the fragrance of your perfumes, O heavenly Spouse! I will run and not tire until you bring me into the wine-cellar."

Celano illustrates Clare's courage when he tells of her behavior toward her family: "Her courage waxed stronger the more her relatives opposed her. Their misplaced affection only strengthened her determination." ¹¹¹

The depth of Clare's spirituality is to be discovered in her habitual joy born of the consciousness that she was loved. ¹¹² In her *Letters* this is the joy she wishes for her children. ¹¹³ Joy is the fruit of love when one possesses the beloved, writes Bonaventure. Here too he manifests an amazing similarity of mind with Clare. ¹¹⁴

There is the secret of that incredible tenacity and determination that astounds everyone who has studied her life. Even more surprising is the fact that she was never harsh or bitter.

To exhibit such courage, such humility and such gentleness, to share love, joy, strength and hope with others, one must be endowed with rare qualities of mind and heart. 115

To spend herself so indefatigably on others as their sister and mother, Clare must have found complete fulfillment as a bride.

¹⁰⁸ LEr.

Also Bonaventure, De perfectione vitae, Op. omn. VIII, 6: militia Christi, cited in n. 4 above.

¹¹⁰4LAg 30-31.

¹¹¹ 1Cel 9. See also R. Haskamp, "Die menschliche und religiöse Entwicklung der hl. Klara," in Klara von Assisi, cited in n. 13 above; courage as a personality trait: p. 47; balanced temperament: p. 58.

¹¹² Also Matura, *Ecrits*, p. 58: "Clare represents what we might call a pleasant spirituality."

spirituality."

113 E.g. 3LAg 10-11: "Therefore, dearly beloved, may you too always rejoice in the Lord.

And may neither bitterness nor a cloud of sadness overwhelm you, O dearly beloved Lady in Christ, joy of the angels and crown of your sisters!"

¹¹⁴Bonaventure, too, assigns a central role to joy, as we can see from his use of such concepts as *complacentia* ('a desire to please'), *gaudium* ('happiness'), *unctio* ('the oil of gladness'), *exultatio* ('the highest degree of *excessus mentis* [rapture]'), and his interpretation of *fruitio gloriae* ('the beatific vision').

¹¹⁵ This is expressed by the Bull Gloriosus Deus, which views Clare's motherhood and the fruitfulness of her life as flowing from her total dedication to Christ as His poor bride.