# "To Her Who Is Half of Her Soul": Clare of Assisi and the Medieval Epistolary Tradition

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Agnes of Prague offers a privileged, albeit often neglected, window on the rich landscape of medieval spirituality. The various spiritual interests and concerns of medieval women and men appear with delightful freshness and vitality throughout many extant letters. In addition to an undeniable wealth of information concerning spiritual issues, these letters frequently convey a vivid sense of the writer's personality, which is not as evident in other forms of medieval literary documents. This is not surprising given the unique genre of written correspondence. As Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus point out in Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre, letters are an exceedingly effective means of self-expression and communication because they foster a direct manifestation of ideas and emotions.

In the Middle Ages, letters were particularly suited to female writers like Clare of Assisi who did not have the academic education, literary

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>On literary genres and spirituality, see J. A. Wayne Hellmann, "Genres of Spiritual Writing" in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993) 922-930; on epistolary literature in particular see 924-925.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus, *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993) 1.

patronage, editors, and publishing possibilities more readily available to male writers. Cherewatuk and Wiethaus note that women of various backgrounds and social settings found letters to be a flexible genre to treat a variety of themes from church reform and secular politics to family questions and the nature of the spiritual life. Within the predominant oral culture of the medieval world, the epistolary production of the female writers confirmed their authority among their male as well as female peers. The letters of these women writers, like those of their male counterparts, were considered to be gracious signs of friendship, prestige and favor bestowed upon the recipients by the writers.

As various studies concerning women and medieval epistolary literature indicate, there is an intrinsic link between genre, self-expression, female perspectives, and spirituality. What is stated in general about female correspondence in the Middle Ages holds true in particular when readers turn to Clare's Letters to Agnes of Prague. The contemporary effort to grow in the understanding and appreciation of Clare's spirituality is greatly enhanced, therefore, when her letters are considered as examples of a literary genre common to her historical period. This study hopes to bring to light various aspects of Clare's spirituality as they are uniquely revealed through the prism of the epistolary genre. Letters such as Clare's to Agnes, because they arise in the context of interpersonal dialogue, demonstrate the significance of human relationships in the development and articulation of personal spirituality. Consequently, this study will direct particular attention to the dynamic of Clare's friendship with Agnes, their desire to

<sup>3</sup> Cherewatuk and Wiethaus, 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup>Cherewatuk and Wiethaus, 3-4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup>Giles Constable, *Letters and Letter Collections*: Typologie des sources du moyen âge, 17 (Turnhout: Éditions Brepols, 1976) 15-16.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup>On this point, see J. A. Wayne Hellmann, "Genres of Spiritual Writing," 925. On the use of the epistolary genre among women and the question of friendship, see Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus, "In Search of Medieval Women's Friendships," in Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics, ed. Ulrike Wiethaus (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993): 93-111.

follow Christ, the call to imitate Mary, and their relationship with other sisters and friars.

## Epistolary Literature in the Middle Ages

Medieval epistolary writers, be they women or men, followed the example of their classical predecessors by stressing the representative function of a letter, according to Giles Constable. In his monograph on the epistolary genre of the Middle Ages, Letters and Letter Collections, Constable notes that the most important thing for medieval writers was not that a letter was actually sent, but, rather, that it accurately represented what they would say if they were in the presence of the addressee. Examples of the earliest Greek extant letters indicate that they were originally written instructions reminding the messengers what to communicate orally to the intended recipients. Those bearing the letters were frequently seen as envoys who would often deliver an oral message along with the written one. In fact, the word nuntius, or "envoy," is almost synonymous with epistola in thirteenth century legal sources.8 These oral or written messages were not a simple transferal of information; they formed part of an on-going dialogue between the sender and the addressee thereby conveying a sense of personal presence between the people involved.

The initial decision on the part of the epistolary writer, both yesterday and today, to enter into a dialogue with another is occasioned by the sense of separation from the other. According to Constable, this experience of separation or distance between a writer and the intended recipient of a letter, spoken of as "the epistolary situation" or "the epistolary gap," creates a desire to somehow overcome the separation. Distance here is understood in terms of space as well as time. The writer recognizes that the letter will arrive, if it arrives at all, at some time in the future. The epistolary writer may compensate for the temporal gap by employing verb tenses which serve to bridge the space of time between the writing and reception of the letter. A corresponding attempt to surmount the temporal space might

Constable, Letters and Letter Collections, 13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Constable, Letters and Letter Collections, 53.

Constable, Letters and Letter Collections, 15-16.

also be required from the recipient inasmuch as the letter was written in the past and may not adequately reflect the present thought of the composer. Nevertheless, in the practice of writing and reading, there is an overcoming of the separation between the sender and the addressee by nature of the personal presence imparted by the letter.

The sense of personal presence mediated by a letter suggests that one of the most compelling motives behind the attempts of Clare and other medieval writers to bridge the epistolary distance was friendship.10 The nature and dynamic of friendship, both human and divine, was of great interest in the development of what R. W. Southern terms as "medieval humanism." Such humanism, understood at least in part as the appreciation of human dignity, considered friendship as a singular manifestation of human nobility and a privileged context for the encounter with God. We would be mistaken, however, to constrict the medieval understanding of friendship, or amicitia, to a contemporary interpretation of the term. Constable points out that the cultivation of friendship in the Middle Ages, which was particularly prevalent in the literature of the eleventh and twelfth century, appears to have had a broader social function than is evident in contemporary letter writing.12 Given the restricted possibilities for communication and travel, an attempt to expand the circle of human relationships beyond that of those in close physical proximity necessitated the epistolary genre. As in the case of Clare of Assisi and Agnes of Prague, intimate friendships were entered into and maintained without the correspondents ever having met. In her fourth letter to Agnes, Clare reveals the profundity of their relationship and her desire to remain in contact with her unseen, yet deeply loved friend:

O mother and daughter, spouse of the King of all ages, if I have not written to you as often as your soul—and mine as well—desire and long for, do not wonder or think that the fire of love for you grows with less delight in the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup>Constable, Letters and Letter Collections, 15-16; 31-32.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup>R.W. Southern, *Medieval Humanism and Other Studies* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970) 34-35.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Constable, Letters and Letter Collections, 15-16.

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heart of your mother. No, this is the difficulty: the lack of messengers and the obvious dangers of the road (4LAg: 4-6).<sup>13</sup>

When we refer to the letters of Clare to Agnes, it is important to remember that the medieval understanding of a personal letter is much different from our contemporary understanding. Whereas letters today are frequently intimate, private communications between two individuals, medieval epistolary writers often consciously produced their works as semi-public, literary documents to be collected and published. Medieval writers generally presumed that their letters would be read by more than the person to whom they were originally addressed. Not only were these letters to be read by others, they were to be read "out loud" in the presence of others, since *legere*, "to read," and *audire*, "to hear," were virtual synonyms in the Middle Ages.<sup>15</sup>

## The ars dictaminis and Clare's Letters to Agnes of Prague

The structure of epistolary composition, known in the medieval period as the ars dictaminis, originated in the development of rhetoric and functioned as an epistolary canon comprising five elements: the salutatio, benevolentiae captatio, narratio, petitio, and conclusio. In the composition of a particular letter, the writer was supposed to employ these elements to some degree in a document which was meant to be brief and clearly focused on a single theme. The greeting or salutatio delineated the social position of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup>Regis Armstrong, Clare of Assisi: Early Documents (New York: Paulist Press, 1988) 47. All English translations of Clare's letters are from this work. The critical text of Clare's letters are found in Claire d' Assise, Écrits. intro. and trans. Marie-France Becker, Jean-François Godet, and Thadee Matura (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1985). The following abbreviations are used for each letter: 1LAg = First Letter to Agnes of Prague; 2LAg = Second Letter to Agnes of Prague; 3LAg = Third Letter to Agnes of Prague; and 4LAg = Fourth Letter to Agnes of Prague.

<sup>14</sup>Constable, Letters and Letter Collections, 11.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup>Constable, Letters and Letter Collections, 54.

<sup>16</sup> Cherewatuk and Wiethaus, Dear Sister, 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup>Constable, Letters and Letter Collections, 16-20.

person receiving the letter.<sup>18</sup> After the opening greeting came the benevolentiae captatio which sought the good will of the recipient. The narratio treated the particular purpose behind the letter while the petitio consisted in a request based on the premises of the letter. The conclusio was the formal closing and farewell of the writer.

The presence of the *salutatio* and *conclusio* were the unequivocal indications of the epistolary genre, while the *benevolentiae captatio*, *narratio*, and *petitio* were often modified according to the needs and skills of the writer. Writers such as Clare of Assisi employed the elements of the canon in various degrees with various levels of success. Clare's expertise, and that of many other writers, was revealed in the ability to balance and unite the demands of the *ars dictaminis* with a sense of naturalness in style. Although medieval writers might not have always strictly adhered to the prescribed elements of the epistolary canon, their letters should not be studied without keeping them in mind.<sup>19</sup>

A study of female epistolary literature often reveals that many women possessed at best only an elementary knowledge of the ars dictaminis.<sup>20</sup> This is evident in their utilization of the salutatio and conclusio. The lack of literary sophistication among female writers is not surprising since they were excluded from the cathedral schools and universities where the epistolary models were formally taught. Clare's skillful utilization of the epistolary genre, at least in her letters to Agnes of Prague, indicates that she possessed a more sophisticated knowledge of the ars dictaminis than many other women and men of her day.<sup>21</sup> Although the thirteenth century witnessed a noticeable decline in the number of people capable of reading

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Cherewatuk and Wiethaus, *Dear Sister*, 5 and Constable, *Letters and Letter Collections*, 16-17.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup>R.W. Southern, Medieval Humanism and Other Studies, 87.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup>Cherewatuk and Wiethaus, Dear Sister, 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup>Clare's familiarity with the epistolary canon is not nearly as visible in *The Letter to Ermentrude of Bruges*. In fact, a study of Clare's literary style, based on her use of the epistolary genre in her letters to Agnes, would raise again the question of authenticity vis-à-vis the letter to Ermentrude.

and writing in Latin,<sup>22</sup> Clare's letters indicate that she had acquired the basic skills in Latin necessary in the dictation of a letter. She may have learned the rudiments of Latin from her mother, Ortolana, as it was commonplace among the nobility that mothers taught their daughters to read the Psalter and the lives of the saints.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps Ortolana also introduced Clare to the art of epistolary composition. Clare's literary skill, regardless of her source of instruction, is evident in her letters and confirmed in that she was the first woman in the history of religious life to compose a Rule of Life.<sup>24</sup>

The literary style and tenor of Clare's letters link her to the epistolary writers who proceeded her and distinguish her from the those who followed after her. As R. W. Southern notes in his study of the letters of Abelard and Heloise, twelfth century letters are characterized by their naturalness, learning, and vivacity while thirteenth century letters are recognized by their narrow range of interest, overwrought rhetoric, and artificial use of epistolary conventions. Letters from Clare's thirteenth century contemporaries consist in the most part in exercises of propaganda or in the elaboration of trivial details.25 By the time she began to compose her thoughts for Agnes, not only could fewer people write in Latin, but many of those who could exaggerated the rules of epistolary style and presentation to the point of rendering their letters stiff, contrived, and cold. Even a cursory glance at Clare's letters to Agnes reveals her close affinity with the spirit and style of twelfth century writers for they speak of a dynamic profundity of spirit matched with an accomplished, yet natural, ease in literary expression. Clare's thought is not constrained or lost in her utilization of the various elements of the epistolary canon; these elements

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup>Constable, Letters and Letter Collections, 38.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup>M.T. Clanchy, From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307 (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1979) 196. On the spirituality of Ortolana, see: Marco Bartoli, Clare of Assisi. trans. Sister Frances Teresa (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1993) 15-16; 26; 30-31.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup>On Clare's Rule, see Margaret Carney, The First Franciscan Women: Clare of Assisi and Her Form of Life (Quincy: Franciscan Press, 1993), esp. 65-97.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup>R.W. Southern, Medieval Humanism, 86-87.

are tools which she creatively employs in the exposition of her spiritual concerns to Agnes.

Clare's own usage of the ars dictaminis in her letters to Agnes is seen in the salutatio, benevolentiae captatio, and conclusio which are easily discernible in each one of these four letters. The narratio and petitio are present in modified form as expositions of spiritual themes, exhortations to spiritual growth, specific requests for prayerful support, and personal expressions of concern between sisters and friends. These aspects are often woven together as to render any division between the narratio and petitio of each letter somewhat arbitrary. Granted Clare's unique epistolary style and the concerns of each letter, the salutatio, benevolentiae captatio, and conclusio of her letters merit individual examination while the narratio and petitio are best studied together as closely related literary constructions.

#### The salutatio

An analysis of the *salutatio* found in Clare's first letter (1LAg: 1-2) indicates her awareness of Agnes's exalted social position prior to her religious profession: "To the esteemed and most holy virgin, Lady Agnes, daughter of the most excellent and illustrious King of Bohemia" (1LAg: 1).<sup>26</sup> The *salutatio* of the second letter (2LAg: 1-2), which is dated around 1235, is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup>Armstrong suggests that this letter was written at the time of Agnes's entrance into religious life because of Clare's use of material found in the liturgy of the consecration of virgins, see *Early Documents*, 33-34. A stronger argument can be made that this letter is prior to Agnes's embrace of religious life because the *salutatio* makes no mention of a change in her social position. An earlier dating of this letter is also implied by the language which Clare uses when she addresses Agnes. In the first letter Clare uses the formal *vos* (you) while she uses the informal *tu* (you) in later letters. It is also noteworthy that only the first letter fails to mention the Poor Sisters in Prague. This lack of any reference to the community of sisters is best understood if Agnes was not yet a member of the monastery. Finally, Clare praises the renunciation of material possessions in the first letter in such a manner as to suggest that Agnes is preparing to take the vow of evangelical poverty. On Clare's use of language and dating of her letters, see Maria Fasbinder, "Untersuchungen über die Quellen zum Leben der hl. Klara von Assisi," *Franziskanische Studien* 3 (1936): 297-300 and Englebert Grau, *Leben und Schriften der heiligen Klara von Assisi* (Werl/Westf: Dietrich-Coelde-Verlag, 1988) 22-24.

clearly subsequent to Agnes's profession as it makes no mention of the King of Bohemia. Instead, Agnes is referred to as "the daughter of the King of kings, the servant of the Lord of lords, the most worthy Spouse of Jesus Christ" (2LAg: 1). The salutation of the third letter (3LAg: 1-3), written some four years after Agnes's entrance into the community of the Poor Sisters in 1234, sheds light on how Clare viewed Agnes's reconfigured position in society. Clare writes to "Agnes, sister of the illustrious king of Bohemia, but now the sister and spouse of the Most High King of heaven" (3LAg: 1). The social and religious dimensions of Agnes's evangelical choice appear through the juxtaposition of her former and present kings. From Clare's perspective, the choice to exchange the opportunity of royal marriage for the reality of consecrated virginity opens Agnes to a whole new dimension of social interaction which is rooted in her religious consecration to Christ. The abundant variety of metaphors such as queen, mother, daughter, bride, spouse, handmaid, and servant, which are found in the salutations of letters two, three and four, serve to highlight the rich texture of Agnes's profound relationship with Christ.27

Clare turns to some of these same relational metaphors to convey her appreciation for the depth of her friendship with Agnes. The intensity and intimacy of this friendship, which is fostered by Agnes's new social status, emerge in an outpouring of affection found in the salutations of the third and fourth letter (3LAg: 1-2 and 4LAg: 1-3). The opening line of the fourth letter, written close to Clare's death in 1254, eloquently expresses her love for Agnes:

To her who is half of her soul and the special shrine of her heart's deepest love, to the illustrious Queen and Bride of the Lamb, the eternal King: to the Lady Agnes, her most dear mother, and, of all the others, her favorite daughter (4LAg: 1).<sup>28</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup>On some of the relational metaphors in Clare's writings, see Marianne Schlosser, "Mother, Sister, Bride: The Spirituality of Saint Clare," *Greyfriars Review* 5:2 (1991): 233-249.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup>The idea of a friend as the other half of one's soul is found in Augustine; see Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*. trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1971) 77-78. On Augustine and friendship, see

## The benevolentiae captatio

Clare's attempts to secure Agnes's good will is evident in each of the four letters in which she acknowledges, encourages and rejoices in Agnes's spiritual growth. Clare begins the benevolentiae captatio of the first letter (1LAg: 3-11) by making reference to Agnes's "holy conduct and irreproachable life" which, she says, "is known not only to me but to the entire world as well...." (1LAg: 3). The accent is on the radical choice Agnes made in her decision to forsake all things, including a royal spouse, for the sake of Christ. The captatio of the second letter (2LAg: 3-9) also refers to Agnes's holiness and vocational choice with words of admiration and praise but shifts the center of responsibility by emphasizing the decisive intervention of God in Agnes's life. While Agnes's own involvement in the decision to follow Christ is not inconsequential, it is clearly God, the source of grace, who takes the initiative in Agnes and renders her perfect. Here Clare's line of thought on the interplay between grace and vocation anticipates her later treatment of the subject in her Testament. Holiness is linked with the life of the Poor Sisters in the captatio of the third letter (3LAg: 3-9). As in the captatio of the first letter, the emphasis is on Agnes's growth in holiness through her response to divine grace. Clare employs the popular journey metaphor to convey the dynamic aspect of Agnes's sequela Christi:

I am filled with such joys at your well-being, happiness, and marvelous progress through which, I understand, you have advanced in the path you have undertaken to win *a* heavenly *prize*. And I sigh with so much exultation in the Lord as I have known and believe that you supply most wonderfully what is lacking both in me and in the other sisters in following the footprints of the poor and humble Jesus Christ (3LAg: 3-4).

The content and mood of the *captatio* of the fourth letter (4LAg: 4-14) are a marked departure from that of Clare's earlier letters to Agnes. In this her last letter, Clare takes a decidedly more affective approach by speaking of her profound love for Agnes in addition to her continual progress in the *sequela Christi*. The shift in content and mood reveals a singular intensification in the relationship between Clare and Agnes and the

Marie McNamara, Friends and Friendship for Augustine (New York: Alba House, 1964).

awareness of Clare's approaching death. The *captatio* of the fourth letter reaches beyond the recognition of Agnes's spiritual progress to embrace the reality of a reciprocal love which, like the letter itself, bridges the distance between Clare and Agnes and binds them together.

## The narratio and petitio

The narratio and petitio of the first letter (1LAg: 12-34) emerge from the preceding captatio where Clare focuses on Agnes's desire to live a life of poverty as she follows Christ. After commending her for her decision, Clare encourages her "most beloved sister" to be "strengthened in the holy service of the which You have undertaken for the Poor Crucified" (1LAg: 12-13). The poverty which Agnes chooses, focuses on God inasmuch as it is lived out in imitation of Christ who voluntarily accepted the exigency of those who are despised and poor. Those who, like Agnes, make themselves poor in the sequela Christi will become rich in the kingdom of God. In exchange for the transitory goods of the world which they leave behind, they will receive the hundred-fold blessing promised to the disciples of Christ and will inherit, with them, the blessing of the world to come. Conscious of this divine blessing, Clare makes use of the petitio construction to beg Agnes to persevere in the service of the Lord. If she continues in her resolve and follows the desire of her soul, Agnes can be assured that Christ will share with her his eternal reward. Clare goes on to employ another petitio for prayer so that she and the other sisters in San Damiano may also share in the blessings promised to the servants of the Lord:

I also beg You in the Lord, as much as I can, to include in Your *boly prayers* me, Your servant, though *useless*, and the other sisters with me in the monastery, who are all devoted to You, that by their help we may merit the mercy of Jesus Christ, and together with You may merit to enjoy the everlasting vision (1LAg: 33-34).

Clare utilizes the *narratio* and *petitio* of the second letter (2LAg: 10-23) in a nearly seamless commentary on the nature and praxis of the contemplative vocation. She reminds Agnes that she has resolved to offer herself as a holy and pleasing sacrifice to the Lord. Clare compares Agnes to Rachel, the medieval model of asceticism and contemplation, as she

encourages her to carry out her original resolution to follow the poor Christ. As the contemplative life demands a freedom of spirit to respond to the prompting of God, Clare urges Agnes not to allow any obstacle to impede her openness to the Spirit of the Most High which has called her into a life of perfection in poverty. The strength needed to move forward along the path of perfection and remain faithful to her original resolution to live in poverty is found in the contemplation of the poor Christ. In the embrace of her Crucified Spouse, Agnes will find security, joy and eternal blessings. If she demonstrates her fidelity to him in suffering and death, Clare promises Agnes that she "shall possess heavenly mansions in the splendor of the saints and, in the Book of Life your name shall be called glorious among men" (2LAg: 21).

Clare punctuates her treatment of Agnes's contemplative vocation by referring (2LAg: 15-16) to Brother Elias, who was the Minister General of the Friars Minor during the period in which Clare composed the second letter to Agnes. Olare clearly considers the counsel of this early companion of Francis to be of tremendous assistance in discerning the proper way to live the life of evangelical poverty: In all of this, follow the counsel of our venerable father, our Brother Elias.... Prize it beyond the advice of others and cherish it as dearer to you than any gift (2LAg: 15-16). While Clare is more than willing to reply to Agnes's request for counsel as her letters suggest, she also encourages her, in a style somewhat reminiscent of a petitio, to turn to Elias for insight into the practice of their contemplative life. The challenge of remaining faithful to papal decrees, which allowed her to accept possessions and revenues for the support of her monastery, and her original commitment to poverty placed Agnes in a difficult situation. With her eyes fixed on the poor Christ in prayer, Agnes can entrust herself to the guidance

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup>On Rachel as a model for Clare, see Regis Armstrong, "Starting Points: Images of Women in the Letters of Clare," *Collectanea Francescana* 62 (1992): 75-85.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup>On the relationship between Elias and Clare, see Michael Cusato, "Francis and Clare: An Enigmatic Relationship" in *Clare of Assisi: Investigations*, ed. Ingrid Peterson, Vol. VII of *Clare Centenary Series* (St. Bonaventure, NY.: The Franciscan Institute, 1993) 95-115. See also Engelbert Grau, "Die Schriften der hl. Klara und die Werke ihrer Biographen," *Vita Fratrum* 17 (1980): 8.

of Brother Elias when the way to follow Christ becomes obscured by the conflicting demands of authority and conscience.

The narratio and petitio of Clare's third letter are found in the extended section of 3LAg: 10-41. The two major divisions of the text (3LAg: 10-28 and 3LAg: 29-41) manifest the twofold concerns of the letter: the contemplative vocation of the Poor Sisters and the practice of fasting. 3LAg: 10-28 flows naturally from the preceding captatio (3LAg: 3-9) where Clare gives voice to her great joy in Agnes's option for evangelical poverty. She reminds Agnes that those who have chosen to follow in the footsteps of the poor Christ have found the treasure hidden in the field. Clare then invites her in the beginning of the narratio (3LAg: 10-17) not to allow any bitterness or sadness to capture her heart; instead, she should rejoice and experience the extent of Christ's love. To encounter such love, Agnes is to focus during contemplation upon Christ as Mirror, to let go of whatever might alienate her from his affection, and offer herself to him without reserve:

Place your mind before the mirror of eternity! Place your soul in the brilliance of glory! Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance! And transform your entire being into the image of the Godhead Itself through contemplation.

So that you too may feel what His friends feel as they taste the hidden sweetness that God Himself has reserved from the beginning for those who love Him.

And after all who ensnare their blind lovers in a deceitful and turbulent world have been completely sent away, you may love Him Who gave Himself totally for your love (3LAg: 12-15).

As the *narratio* continues, Clare holds up Mary as the model of the contemplative life (3LAg: 18-28). Whereas Rachel functioned as a model for Agnes in the second letter because of Clare's interest in contemplation and asceticism, Mary apparently is the model of choice in the third letter because of the link Clare perceives between contemplation and enclosure.<sup>31</sup> In this

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup>On Mary as a model for Clare, see Armstrong, "Starting Points," 89-93. On

third letter, Clare is writing to a woman who finally had received permission to dedicate herself completely to the enclosure of a cloistered monastery. Clare compares the womb of Mary to an enclosure when she invites Agnes to follow the example of Mary: "May you cling to His most sweet Mother who gave birth to a Son whom the heavens could not contain. And yet she carried Him in the little enclosure of her holy womb...." (3LAg: 20). In the hiddeness of the monastery cloister, Agnes, like the Virgin Mary, can also carry the Lord within the enclosure of her virginal body. The monastery enclosure serves as the crucial matrix in which Agnes learns to carry the Lord, for to bear Christ requires her to follow in the footsteps of Mary by living a life of poverty and humility among her sisters. The enclosure of the monastery is, therefore, linked inseparably with the enclosure of her body.

Fasting is the next theme in the narratio (3LAg: 29-41). Responding to Agnes's inquiries concerning the celebration of feasts and the practice of fasting among the Poor Sisters, Clare refers to the teaching of Francis. She reminds Agnes that he held the proper discernment in matters pertaining to food to be an essential element of the evangelical life. Spiritual ideals, personal freedom, and physical conditions all need to be taken into consideration in this discernment process. On one hand, the spiritual ideal of a strict observance of fasting, reflected in the practice of eating Lenten fare throughout the year, is laudatory for all those of good health. On the other hand, Francis believed that no one is obliged to fast during the week of Easter and the feasts of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Apostles, unless these days occur on Friday. As Clare notes, Francis wished to celebrate such feasts by a change of food. This personal freedom vis-à-vis feasting and fasting is evident when Clare writes "... on ordinary Thursdays everyone may do as she wishes, so that she who does not wish to fast is not obliged" (3LAg: 34). For their part, those who are weak or sick in anyway are exempt from any obligatory fast.

Clare's general compassion for the weak and the sick sisters of the community is personalized in her preoccupation for Agnes's physical health. Quoting the *Book of Job* "our flesh is not bronze nor is our strength that of

the history of the enclosure, see: Jean Leclercq, "Clausura," in vol. 2 of *Dizionario degli istituti di perfezione* (Roma: Edizioni Paoline, 1975)1166-1174, especially 1170 in reference to Clare.

stone" (Job 6:12), Clare shifts from a general *narratio* style to the more personal, direct form of address of a *petitio*. Here Clare, herself seriously ill since 1225, <sup>32</sup> appeals to her intimate friend to take note of the natural weakness and frailty of her own body in the discernment of her practice of fasting. She goes on to write, "I beg you, therefore, dearly beloved, to refrain wisely and prudently from an indiscreet and impossible austerity in the fasting you have undertaken" (3LAg: 40). Her hope is to restrain any desire on Agnes's part to undertake exaggerated expressions of fasting which could cause physical harm. If she should abuse herself, Agnes's own service to the Lord would be compromised. To praise the Lord with her life and to offer herself to the Lord as a sacrifice does not demand the destruction of her body.

The narratio and petitio of the fourth letter (4LAg: 15-38) are pervaded with the intensity of Clare's intimate affection for Christ, her loving Spouse, and Agnes, her beloved friend. The first section (4LAg: 15-33) centers on the image of Christ as Mirror and Bridegroom. As the Spouse of Christ, Agnes, like Clare, is to gaze daily on her reflection in the mirror of Christ's birth, passion, and death on the Cross. Poverty, humility, and charity are the hallmark virtues of Christ's life; they are also the virtues that adorn whoever wishes to be the bride of Christ, the Most High King. According to Clare, the contemplation of Christ as Mirror flows into yearning for Christ as Spouse. Inflamed by the remembrance of his love, witnessed in his willing acceptance of suffering and death for the redemption of others, Agnes is ultimately drawn up into the ever deepening, spiral of love which culminates in her passionate union with Christ, the desire of her heart.

Just as the first section of the *narratio* speaks of Christ as Mirror so, too, the entire text of 4LAg: 15-38 serves as a mirror reflecting the profound depths of Clare's interpersonal relationships, be they divine or human. While the first section (4LAg: 15-32) treats the mystical relationship between contemplatives such as Agnes and Christ as Mirror and Spouse, the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup>Although Clare was seriously ill herself at the time she wrote her third letter to Agnes, she appears to count herself among those who were well when she states, "... none of us who are healthy and strong should eat..." (3LAg 32). On his point, see Grau, *Die Schriften der hl. Klara*, 8.

second section (4LAg: 33-38) offers a profound testimony to the friendship between Clare and Agnes. The dynamic of mutual, interdependent love in Clare's life is evident in both these sections of the text. Clare shares her desire for union with Christ with Agnes as she reflects on the dynamic of union with her Bridegroom. Her love for Christ draws Clare closer to Agnes, who, sharing the same passion for the divine, is herself, like Christ, a person who elicits Clare's deepest affections. There is no dichotomy, opposition or competition between these two loves in Clare's life. As she writes of passionate union with Christ, her love for Agnes emerges in striking tones. In language remarkably similar to that used by mystics when confessing their inability to describe the experience of God's love, Clare admits her own incapacity in expressing her encounter with love:

What more can I say? Let the tongue of the flesh be silent when I seek to express my love for you; and let the tongue of the Spirit speak, because the love that I have for you, O blessed daughter, can never be fully expressed by the tongue of the flesh, and even what I have written is an inadequate expression (4LAg: 35-36).

As the final section of the *narratio* (4LAg: 37-38) indicates, the love shared between Clare and Agnes, is expansive and inclusive. The memory of their mutual devotion moves Clare to recall her affection for the other sisters comprising Agnes's community. The public nature of Clare's letter to Agnes becomes apparent here as she begs, with a *petitio*, that the words she has written be understood as representative of her warm regard for Agnes's sisters. Furthermore, as she recommends herself and her sisters to Agnes's community, her words evidence the collective love that binds the Poor Sisters of Assisi with those in Prague.

#### The conclusio

The conclusio of Clare's letters to Agnes shows a progression in Clare's affection for her sister together with an appreciation of the community of sisters. A comparison between the mode of address in the first conclusio, "Farewell in the Lord. And pray for me" (1LAg: 35), and the beginning of the second conclusio, "Farewell, most dear Sister, yes, and Lady, because of the Lord, your Spouse" (2LAg: 24), bear out this observation. A further examination of each conclusio shows how the mutual experience of life in community was crucial in the definition and expression of the relationship

between Agnes and Clare. In the first conclusio, written before Agnes entered the monastery of the Poor Sisters, there is no mention of the sisters in Prague or Assisi. At this point the relationship between the two revolves around a mutual faith in Christ, a desire to live in poverty, and a willingness to pray for each other. After Agnes's religious profession, however, the community of the Poor Sisters becomes a point of reference in each conclusio. For example, the second letter ends with the words "Commend me and my sisters to the Lord in your fervent prayers, for we rejoice in the good things of the Lord that He works in you through His grace. Commend us truly to your sisters as well" (2LAg: 24-25). The conclusio of the third letter also mentions the community of sisters, (3LAg: 42) as does the ending of the fourth letter (4LAg: 39). While Clare continues to refer to the Lord and prayer as she did in the first conclusio, the new element in the endings of the later letters is the memory of the sisters, be they in Assisi or Prague.

The conclusio of the fourth letter is particularly noteworthy as it was written shortly before Clare's death in 1253 and mirrors in several ways the communal reality of Clare's life. Already in the preceding petitio (4LAg: 37-38), the memory of the community is evident where Clare writes of the mutual bond of affection between her and Agnes's sisters. Her awareness of their spiritual union and common vocation is furthered by the presence of her blood sister Agnes, who had evidently come from the monastery of Monticelli to be with her dying sister. Clare refers to Agnes here not as "my sister" but as "our sister" (4LAg: 38). The importance of the wider Franciscan community is confirmed by Clare's reference to the two friar messengers, Amatus and Bonaugura, who carried her letter to Prague. It is, however, the echo of Clare's affection for Agnes, and her belief in the eternity of their love which provides the most striking witness to her experience of community: "Farewell, my dearest daughter, to you and your daughters until we meet at the throne of the glory of the great God, and desire [this] for us" (4LAg: 39).

#### Conclusion

As examples of spiritual writing, Clare's letters offer a privileged vantage point from which her spirituality can be assessed and appreciated. They underline the exceptional worth of interpersonal relationships as the matrix for spiritual growth. Clare's epistolary relationship with Agnes, which progresses and deepens as they write, witnesses to the role of dialogue in the

spiritual journey. Her letters originate within the context of a community of sisters where she has struggled, together with them, to walk faithfully in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. Her memory of Francis, and the presence of friars such as Elias, encourages her to persevere in the evangelical life as other ecclesial officials at times, willingly or unwillingly, stand in her way.

All these people become a part of Agnes's own world as Clare directs her thoughts to her distant sister and her community. As Clare dialogues with Agnes over the miles, the echoes of her relationships with Christ, the Virgin Mary, her sisters, Francis, Elias, and others are clearly heard. Clare's own desire to contemplate Christ in poverty, encouraged and challenged by others, is defined even further in the dynamic of spiritual exchange that she shares with Agnes, and through Agnes, with the rest of the community of sisters in Prague.

The remembrance of the sisters and others in Clare's correspondence manifests the depth of her affection for them and affirms both the public and social reality of medieval epistolary literature. When she referred to the sisters in Agnes's community in Prague, Clare could presume that the sisters would hear these words addressed to them in a public reading, as medieval letters were often shared with the community to which the recipient belonged. This praxis of public reading suggests a contemporary hermeneutical approach which would read and interpret Clare's letters, as well as other similar medieval letters, in the context of community. Such an approach does not denigrate a private reading of such literature. It should be noted, however, that private, silent reading may create a much different dynamic of interpretation than that of public, audible reading. Those writing for a particular social group of people beyond that of the singular recipient often construct their texts in a different fashion from those who are writing for an individual recipient. Clare's correspondence with Agnes, whom she esteemed as "half of her soul," was composed within the context of a community for a community. Contemporary studies of Clare's letters would do well to observe a hermeneutic grounded in this relational reality.

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