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St. Francis and St. Clare in the Medieval Mysticism of Love

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"San Francesco e santa Chiara nella mistica medioevale dell'amore"
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Today, eight centuries after the birth of Clare of Assisi, we can perhaps see more clearly the 180-degree reversal of values wrought by Franciscanism in the heart of medieval Christian Europe. This new discovery or deeper understanding, which calls us all to reflect in this anxious age of ours, has come from three essential perspectives revealed in the anthropology of the new millenium. In their most summary form, these are: the ontological primacy of the interpersonal, the revelatory power of the symbolic, and the agapic value of "a life of the highest poverty."

These three statements together are a key to the interpretation of all Franciscan discussion today, when perhaps more than ever before, the figures of Francis and Clare seem inseparable in their originality and uniqueness. The eighth centenary of the birth of Clare is the right time, the providential *kairós* for rediscovering the message of Assisi, illuminated by both the Portiuncula and San Damiano. Its fully human dimension is that which came from the hands of God, as we read in the hymn to creation in the first chapter of Genesis, when he "created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27).

Let us begin with a brief analysis of the first point: the original primacy of the "We" over the "I." Modern anthropology came to an essential clarification when it found that human beings are intersubjective from the very beginning. The "We"—and the "I-Thou" relationship in

particular—precedes awareness of the uniqueness of the "I." There is not first an "I" like a piece of fenced-in land which then opens itself gradually to the spaces of others, to the social "We" as if to achieve its integration. Rather the "I," every "I" is intrinsically constituted by the "We" from its first appearance on earth when the human embryo implants itself in the walls of its mother's womb. Formerly we spoke of personalism; from now on we will need to speak, more exactly, of *interpersonalism*. The property of the human being is to be embodied—specifically, *to be its own body*—and to manifest and *express itself* to another human being by its movements and positions, its expressions of need and desire, pleasure and pain, acceptance and refusal—in other words, in a relationship between two subjects or *co-subjects*, if we may put it that way. Thus there is reciprocity between an "I" and a "Thou," according to what Martin Buber has called the basic formula of human experience. In an inter-subjective relationship, the revelatory behavior of the "I" places it in relationship to a revealing-revealed "Thou." This is what happens when the fruit of fertilization reveals the mother to herself; for the first time a mysterious world opens up, one that entrusts itself to her in that wordless exchange which is the miraculous process of gestation.

This snapshot of concrete anthropology should not be seen as a digression from our subject. Without such phenomenological talk, we could not truly understand an important part of the entire Francis-Clare discussion. The story of their first meetings is the story of overpowering emotion. Francis desired "*to wrest* this noble spoil *from the evil world* and win her for his Lord," and "with only one close companion accompanying her, the young girl, leaving her paternal home, frequented the clandestine meetings with the man of God, whose words seemed to her to be on fire and whose deeds were seen to be beyond the human."[1] But after the extreme delicacy of these meetings when Francis was forming his "first little plant," it is the expressive gesture of Clare that dominates. After running away from her home, she was received at the Portiuncula at night by the brothers carrying lighted torches: "There, her hair shorn by the hands of the brothers, she put aside every kind of her fine dress."[2]

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[1]LegCl 5; pp. 256-57. [Translations from the Clare sources are by Regis J. Armstrong, *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*. The page numbers given refer to this work.–Tr.]

[2]LegCl 8; p. 259.

Francis, like Clare, felt, understood, and communicated in necessary words, in silence, and in bodily gestures. He was not used to thinking or living in abstractions. Recall what was revealed to him at the beginning of his conversion, in the kiss he gave the leper, when he overcame his instinctive abhorrence of what was then the most horrible and wretched human suffering. Following that embrace, "What had been so repugnant to him had really and truly been turned into something pleasant."[3] He had been shown the incomparable dignity of a suffering human being, the locus of an infinite revelation (of which we will speak shortly). The gestures of the kiss and embrace—sung and idealized by thirteenth-century "courtly love" in the meticulous laws of troubadour rhetoric—are found in the biographies of Francis and Clare in all their simplicity and naturalness of expression. Francis kisses the hand of the priest living in sin because it touched the body of Christ; he kisses the feet of the brothers, the poor, a peasant, an offended confrere. At the canonization process for St. Clare, Sister Benvenuta tells how

> from the time the mother Saint Clare entered religion, she was so humble she washed the feet of the sisters. One time, while washing the feet of one of the serving sisters, she bent over, wishing to kiss the feet. That serving sister, pulling her foot away, accidentally hit the mouth of the blessed mother with her foot.
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> More than this, the blessed Clare used to hand water to the sisters and, at night, covered them from the cold.[4]

But the climax, perhaps the highest expression of the love that united Clare to Francis, is the vision that Clare related to Sister Filippa, daughter of Lord Leonardo di Ghislerio. Sister Filippa describes it in her testimony at the canonization process. I am referring to love or loving friendship, as in the bull of canonization of 1255, which speaks of "the communion of familiarity: meek in word, gentle in deed, and lovable and tolerant in everything."[5] But there is something deeper, feminine, in Clare's virginal relationship to Francis. Francis and Clare, "his wonderful disciple in the observance of evangelical perfection,"[6] loved each other truly as man and

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[3]LCS 11.

[4]Proc II, 3; p. 142.

[5]BC 10; p. 242.

[6]SP 108.

woman, in the service of that creation which made man and woman—together and inseparably—in the image of God.

Here, then, is the dream. It strikes a blow against historical "propriety" or hermeneutic delicacy left in the hands of those eager to defile eros, or as Peter Wust would say, those who would secularize the *intimum mentis*.

> Lady Clare also related how once, in a vision, it seemed to her she brought a bowl of hot water to Saint Francis along with a towel for drying his hands. She was climbing a very high stairway, but was going very quickly, almost as though she were going on level ground. When she reached Saint Francis, the saint bared his breast and said to the Lady Clare: "Come, take and drink." After she had sucked from it, the saint admonished her to imbibe once again. After she did so what she had tasted was so sweet and delightful she in no way could describe it.
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> After she had imbibed, that nipple or opening of the breast from which the milk comes remained between the lips of blessed Clare. After she took what remained in her mouth in her hands, it seemed to her it was gold so clear and bright that everything was seen in it as in a mirror.[7]

I am in agreement with recent Franciscan scholars concerning the account's trustworthiness. It is told with naturalness and simplicity, and with no concern that it might lessen veneration for the saint during the canonization process. Moreover, it is confirmed by two other sisters. But I think it is important to see it as a document that is deeply revealing and existential in nature; in reality, it is about transformed sexuality, about the relationship between Clare and Francis. Why not interpret Clare's seeing herself reflected in the opening in Francis's breast, which became "clear and bright gold," as an intense desire to be identified with Francis, even to the point of wishing to incorporate herself into him, so as to find herself completely realized in him?

We will find the symbolism of the mirror again in Clare's mystical immersion in the mystery of the Trinity. But meanwhile it is indeed unfortunate that we have no written evidence of the Francis-Clare relationship. For, in the words of Manselli, it was, humanly speaking, "particular, recognizable, without ambiguity, like a relationship of esteem, profound understanding and the deepest affection." If there were such evidence, "most probably it would be similar to what we have of the

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[7]Proc III, 29; p. 152.

remarkable correspondence between Brother Jordan of Saxony and Diana of Andalò...whose letters, frankly speaking, were love letters in the true sense of the word."[8]

In short, if these analyses and observations are given their due weight, we must suppose that at the heart of Franciscan spirituality lies a concrete love relationship between man and woman, lived in a vocation of virginal purity and chastity, which in no way diminishes its symbolic power. In fact, it has nothing to do with the sophisticated ritualism of *joy d'amors* or courtly love for the idealized lady, so widespread in the erotic literature of the thirteenth century. Nor has it anything to do with the quietism of "pure love," which gave rise in late seventeenth-century France to the edifying writings of Fenelon. The universe of Francis and Clare was born or grew larger on the anthropological foundation of that authentic I-Thou of the man-woman relationship, that "being-together-in love" which Ludwig Binswanger called the deepest and most real psychological characteristic of existence.

But that universe would end up being misunderstood or exposed to serious ambiguities if it were not also recognized in its authentic structure as a symbolic universe.

To avoid a long discussion of symbolism in contemporary philosophy, at least since Cassirer has given the most coherent explanation of his definition of a human being as an *animal symbolicum*, we can begin at once by clarifying the notion of symbol. What is a symbol? The word, let us recall, comes from the Greek *symbállein* meaning "to put together." Umberto Galimberto writes: "The custom was widespread in ancient Greece of cutting a ring, a coin, or some other object in two and giving half to a friend or guest. These halves, kept by the two parties from generation to generation, allowed their descendants to recognize each other. This sign of recognition was called a symbol. Plato refers to the myth of Zeus who, wishing to punish man but not destroy him, cut him in two. He concludes that henceforth 'every one of us is the symbol of a man' (*Symposium*, 189-98), the half that seeks the other half, the corresponding symbol."[9]

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[8]In AA.VV., *Movimento religioso femminile e Francescanesimo nel secolo XIII*, Assisi 1980, p. 347.

[9]*Dizionario di Psicologia*, UTET, Turin 1992, p. 874.

A central place in Franciscan symbolism is occupied by the two symbols found in the two archetypal accounts of creation in the first two chapters of Genesis. In the first account (Gen 1:1-2:3), the unity of the human couple ("male and female he created them," "in the image of God he created them") is the symbol of the Blessed Trinity—a part, as it were, that God detached from himself, so that, in its history in the world, it might celebrate the transparent love story of the three Persons in the eternity of the divine life.

"In the beginning was the Trinity," writes Jesus Sanz Montes in a recent very perceptive study of Franciscan love.[10] Human history has been destined to be a symbol of God's life of love in the life of love of the human couple.

The theologian Bruno Forte states: "In this 'bosom of the Trinity' we must rethink the human condition, the human community, and the Church in which—by means of daily acts of love—the future revelation of the glory of Love is already being prepared, when human history will be joined forever to the eternal story of God."[11]

But the symbolism in the second account (Gen 2:4-25) seems to tell of the possibility of sin and the incarnation of the Son of God in the Redemption of human love. Closer to the literal meaning of the Greek word "symbol," the breaking of the human being is wrought by God in the body of Adam, made of earth. Around his rib, God creates woman, a companion for him in his loneliness. Here the man and the woman are reciprocally the "half" of each other, as if to foretell that Christ, the Son of God, would come to rejoin them in love. Already he is present and active in the story of their return to the home of the Trinity, to the immanent Trinity, "the Love that moves the sun and the other stars" (Dante). In the Incarnation, the human love of the man-woman couple is the highest symbol of the *sequela Christi*, of the Son of God who became flesh and thus became suffering and neediness in the flesh of human beings on earth. In the eleventh century, the great Cistercian mystic of love, Aelred of Rievaulx, proposed a most profound formula: "I and thou, and I hope that the third [person] between us is Christ."[12] This presence of Christ shines in the loving friendship

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[10] *Francesco e Chiara, icona e parola d'amicizia*, Rome 1990, p. 27ff.

[11] *Trinità come storia. Saggio sul Dio cristiano*, Milan 1985, p. 7.

[12] *De spirituali amicitia*, PL, 195, col. 601.

between Francis and Clare. And their love achieves its mystical depth in the vision of Jesus who suffers in suffering humanity. At the heart of their love, the human condition of the Son of God is the real symbol or sacrament giving infinite value to the world's suffering. This is the meaning of their "life of the highest poverty." The poor—and in their most tragic form, the lepers—are the suffering Christ.

Certainly, suffering was very widespread during the last decades of the century when Francis lived as a flamboyant youth. A series of horrible famines, a population that outgrew production, increasing disparity between a few rich and the many poor in an economy of trade and money; marginalization of the "absolutely poor" such as lepers or those without land, of young people without a future, of fugitives from the factional wars—all these were so many signs overshadowing that age of urban paleo-capitalism.[13]

But as Manselli has rightly observed: "Unlike what people usually think, Francis's conversion was not that of a rich man who wanted to become poor. In other words, he is not another Waldo. His conversion began when he became aware of human pain and suffering. In this pain and suffering he found both Christ and poverty at the same time."[14] In the poor, Francis rediscovers, relives and understands the suffering of Christ who emptied himself unto death, death on a cross. There is no other explanation for his choice to live in poverty, with no goods at his disposal, either individually or collectively. This contrasts with the monastic tradition and, we know, was contrary to the views of many of his own followers—but not the one who out of love followed him faithfully in her life and in the instructions she left her followers. In the end Clare would obtain the famous "privilege of poverty," giving her the right to refuse every offer of fixed temporal goods.

Why such persistence in a woman as meek and gentle as Clare? Her courage and stubbornness were such that in some cases she even threatened church authorities (as someone has pointed out) with what we would call a hunger strike.

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[13]See Michel Mollat, "*Pauvres et pauvreté dans le monde médiéval*," in AA.VV., *La povertà nel secolo XII e Francesco d'Assisi*, in Atti del II Congresso della Società Internazionale di studi francescani, Assisi 1975, p. 84ff.

[14]"*La povertà nella vita di Francesco d'Assisi*," in op.cit., p. 262.

Her faithfulness in love and obedience to Francis came from their deepening knowledge of Christ, in the sufferings of the Son of God which alone give meaning to human suffering. The fourth letter to Agnes of Prague describes in mystical accents the richness of this symbolic world, both Trinitarian and Christic, in which Clare lived and shared the experience of her love for Francis, where Jesus is the "third person between us," according to the emblematic formula of Aelred.

Clare begins by inviting Agnes, who is "half of her soul and the special shrine of her heart's deepest love," to gaze at herself each day "in the brilliance of eternal light and the mirror without blemish" which is Christ, "in whom are reflected blessed poverty, holy humility, and inexpressible charity."[15] She goes on to exhort her in the words of the Canticle of Canticles:

> From this moment, then, O Queen of our heavenly King, let yourself be inflamed more strongly with the fervor of charity. As you further contemplate his ineffable delights, eternal riches and honors, and sigh for them in the great desire and love of your heart, may you cry out: *Draw me after you, we will run in the fragrance of your perfumes*, O heavenly Spouse!
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> I will run and not tire, until you bring me into the wine-cellar, until your left hand is under my head and your right hand will embrace me happily, [and] you will kiss me with the happiest kiss of your mouth.
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> In this contemplation, may you remember your poor little mother, knowing that *I have inscribed* the happy memory of you *on the tablets of my heart*, holding you dearer than all others.[16]

This ascent to the most joyful participation in the love of Christ leads us to a final consideration on what I have called the agapic value of a life of the highest poverty. I wonder if today we can really think of "blessed poverty," the happy warmth of a banquet (this is the original meaning of *agápe*) around a table of miserable scraps of bread collected by begging in the streets? We are told that Clare "received with great joy the fragments of alms and the scraps of bread that the questors brought and, as if saddened by whole [loaves of] bread, she rejoiced more in the scraps."[17]

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[15]4LAg 1, 14, 18; pp. 49-50.

[16]Ibid., 27-34; pp. 51-52.

[17]LegCl I, 14; p. 270.

Poverty, real and hard poverty—is it not a constant source of worry about tomorrow, a source of resentment and envy, or at least collective grumbling as we see, for example in some famous scenes from Buñuel's film *Viridiana*? It would be naive to confuse two qualitatively different spheres of experience, such as physical pleasure (or at least the pleasure of being alive) and religious, mystical joy. But here it is a question of a radical choice that has to do with the "We" rather than "the monopsychism of the I," as Giovanni Papini would say. The choice of poverty means renunciation of all possessiveness toward others and the call to become part of the community of the suffering, the disenfranchised, the rejected. In becoming incarnate, Christ took upon himself—from the poverty of Bethlehem to the absolute abandonment of the cross—the condition of neediness, which is the condition of every living creature on earth and whose exemplary figure, in whom Christ is reflected, is the one who is poor, utterly poor.

"A life of the highest poverty," which Francis and Clare chose as a covenant of love, where Christ is the foundation and absolute "Thou," means freedom for those who begin to follow him by giving up all. The message proclaimed by Francis and Clare is not a social revolution aimed at eliminating poverty. It is rather a revolution in values that changes the meaning of poverty and proclaims the redemption of a world freed from the violence of possessiveness, from the covetousness that is the root of all evil. The paradox of "blessed poverty," the most characteristic mark of the life and work of St. Clare, can be understood only in the authentic love which rejects any form of appropriation of the beloved, in the gospel celebration of freedom as a fraternity of the humble.