

St. Clare and Nuptial Sprituality

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"Saint Claire et la spiritualité nuptiale"

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In every age the church has employed the symbolism of nuptial union to describe union with Christ. In the Middle Ages, especially from the twelfth century on, this tradition assumed the form of what we might call nuptial spirituality or even nuptial mysticism. St. Clare of Assisi, in the thirteenth century, used this imagery and its language in her writings. However, she did this to a lesser extent than previous authors or even her own contemporaries. Such allusions as exist may be found in her four *Letters* to Agnes of Prague, and the only passage that employs this language consistently is at the beginning of the first *Letter*.¹

To fully appreciate this document, we must first give a brief summary of its place in the history of literature and doctrine, then situate it within the politics of the Middle Ages.

I. The Tradition

Nuptial symbolism corresponds to a universal archetype attested in many religions.² It is found in the Old Testament, especially Psalm 44 (45) and the *Song of Songs*, as well as in the *New Testament* — Gospels, Epistles, Revelation. Of these biblical sources, the most explicit and influential has been the *Song of*

¹Clare of Assisi, *Ecrits*, ed. M. F. Becker, J. F. Godet, T. Matura, Paris 1985 (Sources chrétiennes, 32S), p. 84. Hereafter, *Ecrits*. [Tr. note — For our English version, we use *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, ed. and trans. by Regis. J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap.]

²For an overall view and recent bibliography, see *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, XV, Lieferung 3/4 (1990), coll. 505-14, art. *Hobelied* by various authors.

Songs. From Origen, to St. Therese of Lisieux, to our own day,³ Christian writers have never ceased studying this book for its own sake and for its spiritual meaning.⁴ One early use of this symbolism that would leave a lasting mark was the fifth-century *Passion of St. Agnes*, a Roman martyr who had lived in the third century.⁵

The Song continued to be read and explained throughout the Middle Ages. St. Gregory the Great left three commentaries on it, and each successive age produced its own interpretations, either Christian (especially by the monks) or rabbinical.⁶ Among the rabbinical commentators, one of the most renowned was Rashi of Troyes at the end of the eleventh century.⁷ In the first half of the twelfth century, St. Bernard of Clairvaux was a Christian example.⁸

Throughout this literature, considerations of a theological nature attempt to answer questions such as: who is the bridegroom? who is the bride? what is the nature of their union? The answer given is soteriological. Nuptial union suggests the salvation given by God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. This love is accompanied by moral and psychological manifestations, which are more or less spelled out, depending on the time and culture. But there is little variety. What diversity does exist depends on the talents of the individual commentator. Generally speaking, spiritual nuptial union manifests itself by a sense of joy at being loved and by its fruit which is service of God. All of this applies to every member of the Church, social status notwithstanding.

³On the general history of this symbolism see P. Adnès, "Mariage spirituel," in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, X (1980), coll. 388-408, with bibliography; A. Deblaere, "Mystique," *ibid.* coll. 1904-19. For pre-Christian and gnostic antecedents, see Adnès, *idem.*, coll. 389-90.

⁴For the state of scholarship on the *Song of Songs*, see R. J. Tournay, *Quand Dieu parle aux hommes de l'amour. Etudes sur le Cantique des cantiques*, Paris 1982 (*Cahiers de la Revue biblique*, 21); B. Arminjon, *La cantate de l'amour. Lecture suivie du Cantique des cantiques*, Paris (Christus. Contemplations, 58); and especially A. M. Pelletier, *Lectures du Cantique des cantiques. De l'énigme des sens aux figures de lecture*, Rome 1989 (*Analecta Biblica*, 121).

⁵With regard to this *Passion*, sources and studies in H. Fros, B. H. L. *Novum supplementum*, Brussels 1988, pp. 22-24; summary in Pelletier, *ibid.*, pp. 165-67.

⁶A list of all commentaries by the Fathers of the Church and medieval Christian authors, beginning with Cassiodorus, along with Jewish authors, can be found in *The Anchor Bible, The Song of Songs*, New York 1977, pp. 236-44.

⁷On the rabbinic commentator Rashi of Troyes (†1106), see *Bible de tous le temps. Le moyen âge et la Bible*, by P. Riché and G. Lobrichon, Paris 1984, pp. 242-45.

⁸J. Leclercq, *L'amour vu par les moines au XII^e siècle*, Paris 1983, pp. 35-68 *passim*.

II. The Contribution of St. Clare

St. Clare of Assisi falls within this tradition. But she adds new and important elements. Aside from bits of nuptial vocabulary scattered throughout her writings and a few expressions borrowed from the *Song of Songs* and Psalm 44,⁹ she draws the inspiration for her *Letters* to Agnes of Prague, especially the first, from the early legendary *Passion of St. Agnes* of Rome.¹⁰ All these borrowings, without exception, come from the Office for the feast, January 21, including extracts from the *Legend* that were read at the Office of Vigils. These beautiful phrases, sung to melodies no less pleasing, became fixed in people's memories in the past as they still do today. Such observations draw our attention to an important facet of Clare's spirituality, namely the place of the liturgy. We can understand this fact, which has been rightly emphasized,¹¹ even better thanks to a recent study showing how much the Rule written by Clare owes to the *Rule of St. Benedict*.¹²

According to legend, St. Agnes had to choose between marriage and virginity. The latter did not apply to those nuns who had been married and sometimes mothers of families. Widowed or separated from their husbands by mutual consent, they had entered the convent more or less later in life. There they were often chosen as abbesses because of their experience in the administration of temporal goods. For all nuns the goal was union with Christ through love.

What is new in Clare is, first of all, her references to the poverty of the divine Spouse. This typically Franciscan detail is a rich addition to the traditional theme. Equally new is her marked insistence on the sufferings of Christ and those of his spouse. This trait coincides with a tendency we see beginning to develop in the early thirteenth century. In the monastic tradition it is represented by a St. Lutgarde (†1246)¹³ or a St. Ida of Nivelles (†1231).¹⁴ It is also found in the Franciscan tradition.¹⁵ The goal continues to be the joy of

⁹References in *Ecrits*, pp. 45-57 and 205-06.

¹⁰References in *Ecrits*, p. 209.

¹¹R.C. Dhont, *Claire parmi ses sœurs*, Paris 1971. Appendix II, pp. 191-93: *Le chant de l'office chez les pauvres sœurs*.

¹²H. de Sainte-Marie, "Présence de la Règle bénédictine dans la Règle de sainte Claire," in *AFH*, 82 (1989), pp. 3-25.

¹³A. Deboutte, *Lutgarde d'Aywières*, in *Diction. de spirit.*, IX (1976), coll. 1201-04.

¹⁴E. Mikkers, *Ida*, *ibid.*, VII (1971), coll. 1239-42.

¹⁵U. Kopf, "Leidensmystik in der Frühzeit des franziskanischen Bewegung," in *Von Wittenberg nach Memphis, Festschrift für Reinhard Schwarz*, ed. Walter Homolka and Otto Ziegelmeier,

espousal, but experienced in and through suffering which is seen as a sharing in the Passion. Suffering is the occasion and the equivalent of a sort of martyrdom. This mystery was realized by Francis during his illnesses¹⁶ and in the sufferings and humiliations he had to endure at times from those around him.¹⁷ Francis's sufferings, symbolized by the stigmata, gave rise to a spirituality characterized by "concentration on the Passion of Jesus."¹⁸

In the *Letters* of Clare to Agnes, the theme of espousal is developed by contrast. Agnes could either marry a powerful, rich and noble husband, or she could choose Christ, the eternal King who became poor and humble out of love. Love is the key to her spirituality. Love means joyfully embracing poverty and suffering with faith in "the poor crucified One" (*pauper crucifixus*).¹⁹ In the *Passion of St. Agnes of Rome*, virginity is associated with martyrdom;²⁰ in St. Clare it is linked with poverty.²¹ The idea of being spouse goes hand in hand with the idea of being a "sister" of Jesus and, like Mary, His "mother."²² Agnes of Prague, at the same time she is spouse, is also daughter and servant of the King of kings and thus queen with Him. She desires be transformed into the image of God through total love of Him. The way to achieve this is to contemplate Christ, who is the mirror (*speculum*) that reflects his image to anyone who gazes upon it.²³

III. In History

To understand one of the reasons why St. Clare mentions nuptial mysticism in her first *Letter* to Agnes of Prague, we must recall Agnes's position in the religious and political context of her time and place.

She belonged to a royal family. It had long been the tradition of dynasties to boast of the saintly men and women among their forebears. Among the

Göttingen 1989, pp. 137-60.

¹⁶See. S. Ciancarelli, *Francesco di Bernardone, malato e santo*, Florence 1970.

¹⁷See R. Manselli, "Nos qui cum eo fuimus." *Contributo alla questione francescana*, Rome 1980, pp. 62-68, 279-80.

¹⁸U. Kopf, *Leidensmystik*, p. 149.

¹⁹1LAg 2,12.

²⁰1LAg 19; 2LAg 8.

²¹2LAg 8.

²²2LAg 12; 3LAg 1, 15-16; 4LAg 2.

²³3LAg 12-13; 4LAg 3-19. The traditional theme of the mirror is discussed by M. Schmidt, "Miroir," in *Diction. de spirit.* 10 (1980), coll. 1290-1303. Clare is not mentioned in this article, even though she also uses this theme in her *Testament* 19-21. Clare retains the notion of Christ as the mirror.

women, some had been wives, sometimes widows, while others had entered the monastery as virgins. Ordinarily, these noble women later became abbesses.

The phenomenon of "dynastic sanctity" has been widely studied.²⁴ It existed among the Merovingians,²⁵ Carolingians,²⁶ Ottonians,²⁷ and others.²⁸ Sovereigns of the imperial and other royal families would strive to get church authority to recognize — and in that sense canonize — the holiness of important personages. A dynastic cult of this type would add to the prestige of the saint's country and its rulers. Sometimes there were even inter-dynastic rivalries. Arguments would arise over which dynasty had the greatest number of saints or the most outstanding ones. There was, we are tempted to say, a kind of war of canonizations. Part of the preparations for canonization involved the commissioning of hagiographies. These legends could be presented as part of a strategy exercised by the *Lives*.²⁹ Such narratives were inspired by the legends of the early saints and provided the new dynasties with fresh proofs of their nobility.

All these phenomena appeared somewhat later in central Europe than in western Europe and contributed to the spread of Christianity in those regions recently evangelized.³⁰ The thirteenth century saw a gradual feminization of dynastic sanctity and the ideology associated with it. Princesses who would later be venerated as saints founded convents that became centers of charitable

²⁴ A bibliography of the subject has been provided by Gabor Klaniczay, "Sainteté royale et sainteté dynastique au moyen âge. Traditions, métamorphoses et discontinuités," in *Cahiers du Centre de Recherches Historiques*, «Cahiers du Centre de Recherches Historiques» April 1989, n. 3, 79-80. I am grateful to the author of this article for his help in preparing the present study. See also André Vauchez, "Beata Stirps: sainteté et lignage en Occident aux XIII^e et XIV^e siècles," in *Famille et parenté dans l'Occident médiéval*, ed. G. Duby and J. Le Goff, Rome 1977, pp. 397-406.

²⁵ Frantisek Graus, *Volk, herrscher, heiliger im Reich der Merowinger. Studien zur hagiographie der Merowingerzeit*, Prague 1965.

²⁶ Robert Folz, *Le souvenir et la légende de Charlemagne dans l'Empire médiéval*, Paris 1950.

²⁷ Patrick Corbet, *Les saints ottoniens. Sainteté dynastique, sainteté royale et sainteté féminine autour de l'an Mil*, Sigmaringen 1986.

²⁸ Erich Hoffmann, *Die heiligen könige bei den angelsachsen und den skandinavischen Völkern. Königsheiliger und Königshaus*, Neumünster, Wachholz 1975.

²⁹ G. Klaniczay, "Legends as Life Strategies for Aspirant Saints in the Later Middle Ages," in *Journal of Folklore Research* 26 (1989) pp. 151-71, contains illustrative examples of all these phenomena.

³⁰ See G. Klaniczay, "From Sacral Kingship to Self-Representation. Hungarian and European Royal Saints in the 11th and 13th Centuries," in E. Vestergaard ed., *Continuity and change. A symposium. Political institutions and literary Monuments in the Middle Ages*, Odensee 1986, pp. 61-86; *Les rois saints et les Anjou de Hongrie*, Alba Regia, XXII, 1985, pp. 57-66.

work and evangelization. The Franciscans were active in this entire movement. The popes encouraged them as they had formerly encouraged the monks and canons. Genealogical tables of the royal families of central Europe show that they gave the church a considerable number of saintly men and women.

This was particularly true of the Hungarian dynasty, provided we keep in mind that the name "Hungary" referred to a larger geographical area than the present-day country of that name.

The dozen princesses, saints and blessed, who benefited from the immediate popularity of St. Elizabeth of Hungary, canonized four years after her death in 1231, represents a new phenomenon, both quantitatively and qualitatively. To mention only the most important, there were St. Hedwig of Silesia (1174/78-1243), St. Agnes of Bohemia (1205-1282) and her sister St. Anne (1203-65), daughter-in-law of Hedwig, St. Margaret of Hungary (1242-70) and her three sisters (Bl. Kinga, Bl. Yolande and Bl. Constanze). These represent a genuine movement for holiness within these dynasties.³¹

Ready use is made of the traditional themes of nuptial symbolism to describe these holy women. There are new developments as well. Noble and rich, they might have enjoyed all the human advantages of secular society. Instead they freely renounced all in order to become the spouse of Christ, the most powerful of kings, who Himself had renounced all his divine privileges for a life of humility, poverty and suffering. And so, in many ways, these holy women and those who lived with them were an earthly image and anticipation, as it were, of the court of heaven.

Such is the religious, cultural and political background against which we must view Agnes of Prague.³² As a king's daughter and for diplomatic reasons, she was promised in marriage at an early age. Later she received a whole series of proposals. In 1208 at the age of thirteen, she was engaged Boleslaw, duke of Silesia, who died prematurely in 1213. Then she was promised to Henry VII,

³¹G. Klaniczay, *Sainteté royale*, p. 76. See Figure 6.1 for a genealogical table of the saints of the dynasties of central Europe in the 13th century.

³²On Agnes of Prague (or Bohemia) and the sources for her life, the most recent information is in H. Fros, *B.H.L. Novum supplementum*, Brussels 1986, pp. 21-22. Biography: F.S. Ressel, *Die Selige Agnes von Böhmen*, Leipzig 1936; M. Fassbinder, *Princesse et moniale. Agnès de Bobême, amie de Ste Claire*, Paris 1962; biographical notes by A. de Serent in DHGE, I, Paris 1912, coll. 977-79; G. Cerasogli, in BS, I, Rome 1961, coll. 374-75; G. Rocca, in *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione*, I, Rome 1974, col. 154; I. Lilavacik, in LMA, I, Munich-Zurich 1980; J. Polc, *Agnes von Böhmen*, 1211-82, Königstochter, Äbtissin, Heilige, Munich 1989. The volume *Claire d'Assise, Agnès de Prague, Colette de Corbie*, preface by F. Deleclos, Namur 1993 ("Sur la route des saints," 10), contains a biography *Ste Agnès de Prague (1205-1282)* by M.C. Sachot, pp. 35-55.

the two-year-old son of the emperor Frederick II. The engagement was broken in 1227. Meanwhile Agnes had been sent to be educated with the Cistercien nuns at Trebniz in Silesia. There she lived under the influence of her cousin, the future St. Hedwig (†1243, can. 1267).³³ Next she was sent to the nuns of the Order of Premontre at Doxan. Then she lived at the court of Leopold of Austria, where she learned German.

In 1228, Agnes received two offers of marriage — one from the widowed Frederick II and the other from Henry III of England. Her relatives preferred the emperor since that would mean prestige for their dynasty, but she had decided to remain a virgin. The emperor repeated his offer in 1233. At that point she wrote to Pope Gregory IX, asking him to prevent this alliance; a legate had to be sent from Rome to Bohemia to plead her case.

By that time she had begun to carry out "her plan to establish a Franciscan Assisi in Bohemia."³⁴ (The Friars Minor had arrived in Prague in 1232.) There she built a hospital with a church dedicated to St. Francis and St. Barbara. Finally in 1234, probably on the feast of Pentecost, Agnes herself entered the monastery of the Poor Clares, where Gregory IX had her named abbess. Shortly after this St. Clare addressed her first letter to her. Inspired by the Office for the feast of the first St. Agnes, she congratulates this new Agnes for having chosen to become the spouse of Christ, the all-powerful King who became poor. From the *Legend of St. Agnes*, Clare draws certain themes of nuptial mysticism that are more developed in other places. They are found especially in the *Legend of St. Agnes of Prague*, which mentions her entering the monastery in the company of seven young women of the noblest class. There she laid aside her queenly robes to put on the dress of the poor.³⁵

Because her influence due to her royal state, she founded a confraternity of hospital brothers. These men cared for the sick and assisted the poor. In 1237, Gregory IX recognized this institute as an independent canonical order. It was

³³For St. Hedwig of Bohemia, see T. Damin-Wasoniczy, "Sainte Hedwige et le pouvoir (XIIe siècle). Une sainte duchesse et le pouvoir canonique au XIIIe siècle: Hedwige de Silésie et son domaine," in *La femme au moyen âge*, Maubeuge 1990, pp. 381-94. On her life at the various courts, where piety was widespread, see Jerzy Wyrozumski, "La sainteté des femmes dans le mariage in Pologne médiévale," *ibid.*, pp. 249-60.

³⁴G. Rocca, *art. cit.*, n. 9.

³⁵"*Cumque in monasterio crinibus tonsis vestes regias deposuisset... pauperi se habitu conformaret.... Non iam vestitu deaureato ut regina profulsit: non amiciebatur mollibus ut olim in domo regia*" [In the monastery her hair was cut and she laid aside her royal robes... adopting the dress of the poor.... No longer did she shine like a queen in gilded robes, nor did she clothe herself in soft garments as she used to do when in the royal house]: J.K. Vyskocil, *Legenda blaboslavené Anezky a čtyři listy sv. Klary*, Prague 1933, p. 107.

called the Crosiers of the Red Cross. In 1252, Agnes erected a new monastery of Poor Clares in Prague, with a hospital and a church dedicated to St. Francis. Although the theme of anticipation of the heavenly court does not figure expressly in her *Legend*, it does say: "Following her example, many illustrious persons began to build monasteries where countless noble virgins flocked to religious life and, living in the flesh in spite of the flesh, led a heavenly life."³⁶

Once again Agnes exercised a role in the spiritual and temporal spheres.

She wrote to Gregory IX and Innocent III concerning the internal affairs of the Friars Minor and the Rule of the Poor Clares. It is said that she exercised even a political role by her support of the pro-papal policy.³⁷ Throughout her life she was a model of the holy queen completely devoted to the service of Christ the King, whose spouse she had become.

In the first *Letter*, Clare reminds Agnes that she "could have been married to the illustrious emperor."³⁸ If we replace the Latin word *Caesar* at the end of this phrase with the name Frederick II, we can see how relevant the message was at the time and judge to what an extent was part of the culture of the era.

Admittedly, Clare's letters to Agnes tell us much more about the thought of Clare than that of Agnes, whose life we know from other sources. But the historical context — at once religious, political and literary — at least gives us a better understanding of why St. Clare, in her first *Letter*, makes such beautiful use of the themes of nuptial mysticism.³⁹

³⁶"Nam ipsius exemplo plures illustres persone... ceperunt monasteria construere, innumere nobiles virgines et vidue ad religionem confluere et in carne preter carnem viventes celicam uitam actitare." Vyskocil, *Legenda*, p. 111.

³⁷"Beziehungen mit Papsten und propastl. Politik," Hlavaiek, art.cit., see note 9.

³⁸*Cum gloria excellenti valentes inclito Caesari legitime desponsari* 1LAg, 5.

³⁹Clare's letter to Agnes no doubt contributed to the fact that Agnes was soon recognized as a saint. This title is given her in a note, in Czech, that was added to folio 10 of ms. Admont 586 (XIVth c.), according to J. Vintr, "Die älteste Bezeichnung der Premyslidin Agnes als Heilige in einer Admonter Handschrift des XIV Jahrhunderts," in *Wiener Slavistisches Jahrbuch*, 36 (1990), pp. 145-49.