

St. Clare Of Assisi

Francine Gikow, SFO



Lesson Outline - St. Clare of Assisi

- I. Medieval Society & Women's Place
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- III. Development of the Order of Poor Clares
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Abbreviations Used in the Study of St. Clare ¹

1LAg	The First Letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague
2LAg	The Second Letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague
3LAg	The Third Letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague
4LAg	The Fourth Letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague
FLCl	Form of Life (1253)
TestCl	The Testament (1247-1253)
BICl	The Blessing
FLHug	Form of Life provided by Cardinal Hugolino (1219)
PrPov	The Privilege of Poverty of Pope Gregory IX (1228)
FLInn	The Form of Life provided by Pope Innocent IV (1247)
PC	The Acts of the Process of Canonization
VL	The Versified Legend (1254-1255)
BC	The Bull of Canonization
LCl	The Legend of St. Clare
1C	The First Witness of Thomas of Celano (1228)
AP	The Witness of the “Anonymous of Perugia” (1240-1241)
L3C	Legend of the Three Companions (1241-1247)
AC	Assisi Compilation (1244-1260)
2C	The Second Witness of Thomas of Celano (1245-1247)

¹ As used in Regis Armstrong OFM, *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents, The Lady*. New York: New City Press, 2006.

Medieval Society and a Woman's Place

Medieval society in the thirteenth century was a time of transition. A rising wealthy merchant class began challenging the long standing noble families. It was a time of conflict between warring city states (those loyal to the nobility versus the newly rich merchant class, those loyal to the emperor versus the pope, the poor versus the rich.) All encumbered by various alliances and intrigues. The Church, being an integral part of medieval society, was also a part of this conflict. It was seen as corrupt and gluttonous. In addition, the Church lacked spiritual credibility due to the scandalous actions of its priests and leaders.

Noble women at the time were seen as a means to extend wealth and power for their noble families. Women were schooled in reading, sewing, embroidery and running a household. They were hidden from public view inside large palaces in order to preserve their virginity and marriage marketability and essentially led semi-enclosed lives. Marriages were arranged among powerful families to extend wealth, power and preserve peace.²

If a noble woman entered a monastery (sometimes to settle a daughter without marriage prospects or to obtain indulgences for the family) she was expected to bring a dowry with her to the monastery which would supply an income of support for the rest of her life.³ Monasteries acquired lands, orchards and goods which they were able to use for supporting themselves in a very comfortable manner. In fact, a noble woman could even bring with her servants to maintain her standard of living in the monastery. (Later, St. Colette was noted for reforming some of these practices which had crept into Poor Clare life.)

In addition, monasteries were not always immune to the violence which surrounded them.⁴ At times, nuns were raped and their monasteries pillaged. The cloister became the means to protect the nuns with their holiness, silence and enclosure. Some well-connected monasteries sponsored by powerful families, even received special papal privileges of a threat of excommunication for anyone who harmed one of its inhabitants.

However, at this time, not all spiritual women became enclosed. Some became "beguines" who led a consecrated penitential life in prayer and works of mercy but could also keep their property. There were many groups of such women in Umbria. Some of

² Joan Mueller, *Clare of Assisi: Letters to Agnes*, 8.

³ Joan Mueller, *St. Clare of Assisi: Letters to Agnes*. P. 26.

⁴ Joan Mueller, *St. Clare of Assisi: Letters to Agnes*. p.14-5.

these beguines eventually followed the “third rule” and developed into the Penitents of St. Francis (currently the Secular Franciscan Order) but some also gravitated to spontaneous, self-made leaders who were often opposed to the discipline and eventually the doctrinal teachings of the church.⁵ Some even assumed a life of preaching and sacramental ministry. That is why Francis insisted on Church approval for his rule of life.

Clare of Assisi

Clare, born in 1193 or 1194 in Assisi, was the daughter of Offreduccio di Favarone and his wife Ortolana. The family fled to Perugia while Clare was a young girl. Perugia was more favorable to a noble family than was merchant-oriented Assisi. Later they moved back to their palace in Assisi when peace was negotiated between the merchants (Assisi) and the nobles (Perugia).

Clare’s home, next to the Cathedral of San Rufino, was a happy one. Ortolana schooled Clare in the traditional ways of a noble woman but also with a deep religious and spiritual training. She was expected to be married at the appropriate time to another noble family for the traditional reasons. However, Clare had developed a deep prayer life and practiced mortification while still young, and from the age of 16 decided that she would consecrate her life to God. When she was eighteen years old, she heard St. Francis preach during Lent at the Church of San Giorgio in Assisi and Clare became determined to also live the same gospel life as Francis. On Palm Sunday, March 20, 1212, Clare escaped from her home, accompanied by her Aunt Bianca and another companion, leaving through the door of the dead (*porta di mortuccio*) which was blocked by heavy stones and wood. This door allowed only the dead to be carried out, feet first, from the family home and was surrounded with superstitious fear. Those who went out this door, never returned.⁶ Clare met St. Francis and his brothers at the chapel of the Porziuncula (Our Lady of the Angels) and there Francis and his friars accompanied her with candles alight and accepted her vows to live in the service of the gospel. Clare put aside her rich clothes and Francis cut her hair (tonsured) and clothed her in a rough dress and veil as a sign of her consecration.

Initially Francis placed Clare temporarily in the monastery of the Benedictine nuns of San Paolo. (Some say this was to ensure papal protection which the monastery enjoyed.)⁷ Francis gave her a simple “form of life” (*formula vitae*) to begin her life. Her

⁵ Raffaele Pazzelli, *St. Francis and the Third Order*. p.64.

⁶ Karen Karper, *Clare: Her Light and Her Song*. Chicago Illinois, St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1990 p. 76.

⁷ Joan Mueller, *St. Clare of Assisi: Letters to Agnes*. p. xvi.

father, hearing of her decision to share in Francis' gospel living, went to the monastery and tried to persuade her to leave and even tried to drag her out by force. After seeing her shorn head, her father left without Clare. Francis then transferred Clare to another Benedictine monastery of St. Angelo in Panzo. There, Clare was joined by her younger sister, Agnes. The family attempted to recover their second daughter by forcibly removing Agnes. It was said that Agnes grew so heavy that she could not be moved. Eventually Clare was not only joined by her sister, Agnes, but also by her mother, Ortolana, a younger sister, Beatrix and her aunt, Bianca. Understanding the need for a specifically Franciscan monastery, Francis was able to move the fledgling foundation to a rustic dwelling which he built next to the chapel of San Damiano which the Benedictines allowed him to use. It was there, as he had previously prophesied, that he would house his "Poor Ladies" also called "Damianites:"⁸ "*Ladies will again dwell here who will glorify our heavenly Father throughout his holy, universal Church by their celebrated and holy manner of life*"⁹

Throughout Clare's life, she was, as she herself described it, "the little plant of our father, Francis." It was written in her testament, "*When the Blessed Francis saw, however, that, although we were physically weak and frail, we did not shirk deprivation, poverty, hard work, trial, or the shame or contempt of the world... he greatly rejoiced in the Lord. And moved by compassion for us, he bound himself, both through himself and through his Order, to always have the same loving care and special solicitude for us as for his own brothers*"¹⁰

Much against her will, Clare was appointed Abbess by St. Francis and under her spirituality, other foundations of Poor Ladies were started in Italy and throughout Europe. Her daily life was filled with prayer and what was left over was used for manual labor. (Clare was known for spinning a fine thread to be woven into beautiful corporals which were given to churches around Assisi.) Throughout Clare's life, she was a confidant and aide to Francis, helping him to discern whether Francis should retire into a life of contemplation or remain active. Ties with the Franciscan brotherhood were strong since the brothers provided spiritual care and assistance to the poor ladies.

When Francis knew his time of death was near (in the year 1226), he came to visit San Damiano for the last time and there the nuns erected a little wattle hut for him close to the monastery. There he composed the last section of the "Canticle of the Sun." At the end of his life, Francis left a blessing to St. Clare absolving her from any failings if she had any and told her that she "should put aside her grief and sorrow over not being able to see me now. Let her be assured that before her death, both she and her sisters will

⁸ Legend of the Three Companions (L3C), in *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents, The Lady*. 24.

⁹ *TestCl*, 14.

¹⁰ *TestCl*, 27-29

see me and will receive the greatest consolation from me.”¹¹ After his death, Francis’ remains were brought to the monastery at San Damiano where a grill was removed so that Clare and her sisters could say their goodbyes for over an hour.

One night in 1234, Frederick II’s army, on its way to assaulting Assisi, scaled the walls of the monastery at San Damiano. The nuns were in great fear and Clare, rising from her sick bed, took the ciborium from the chapel and faced the invaders. It has been related that as Clare raised the ciborium, the soldiers fell backward as if dazzled and then took flight and the monastery was spared. This is why St. Clare is so often depicted as holding a ciborium.¹²

Later, on June 22nd, 1241, a much larger force returned to attack Assisi and Clare with her sisters gathered in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament praying that the town might be spared. A huge storm rose up, scattering tents and soldiers everywhere and causing such panic that the army left. The people of Assisi showed such gratitude to their “Seraphic Mother” that she became enshrined in the hearts of the common people and this date is celebrated by the people to this day.¹³

Clare’s health was not good and she spent many years as an invalid, being bed bound but still participating in the life of the monastery when able. During one Christmas (as it was described during the testimony for her canonization) Clare was unable to leave her bed to participate in the liturgy. She prayed, “Lord God, look, I have been left here alone with you.” She immediately began to hear the organ, responsories, and the entire Office of the brothers in the Church of Saint Francis, as if she were present there.”¹⁴ She described this experience to her sisters with such detail and joy even though it was impossible for Clare to physically attend the liturgy.

Clare’s influence was also felt far from the hills of San Damiano. Agnes of Prague was one noted follower who learned of Francis through the itinerant preaching of the brothers. Agnes was the youngest daughter of King Premysl Otakar I and Queen Constance of Hungary and was betrothed at a young age to Henry VII of Germany. When this betrothal dissolved due to war, Agnes’ father considered a marital alliance with the English but instead another proposal for marriage was made by Frederick II of Germany, the father of Henry VII. Agnes appealed to the Pope for his help and Frederick II’s proposal was refused and Agnes was now free to choose her own future. She chose poverty. She built her own monastery and hospital from her own funds and requested papal protection for the monastery. Clare sent five German speaking sisters

¹¹ AC13

¹² PC.174-5.

¹³ PC 175.

¹⁴ PC 161.

from Trent to assist with this new foundation and to help Agnes and her sisters to follow the form of life of St. Clare at San Damiano. It is Clare's letters to this Agnes of Prague which have come down to us and reveal Clare's rich spirituality and wisdom.¹⁵

As Clare felt her death approaching, she received the last sacraments from Cardinal Rainaldo. Pope Innocent IV came from Perugia to visit the saint. Clare called her sisters around her and exhorted them to persevere faithfully in evangelical poverty and reminded them of the many benefits they have received from God. Like Francis, the Passion according to John was read and before dawn on August 11, 1253, Clare died peacefully in the company of Brothers Leo, Angelo and Juniper, three of the earliest companions of Francis. Clare lived twenty seven years after her inspiration and father in religious life, passed onto his heavenly reward.

The Rule of Life of St. Clare & the Privilege of Poverty

Francis' Formula Vitae:

The first directive or Rule of Life was from St. Francis, himself, when he gave the sisters the *formula vitae* when Clare consecrated her life to the service of the gospel. It reads: "Since by divine inspiration you have made yourselves daughters and servants of the most high King, the heavenly Father, and have taken the Holy Spirit as your spouse, choosing to live according to the perfection of the holy Gospel, I resolve and promise for myself and for my brothers always to have that same loving care and special solicitude for you as [I have] for them."¹⁶

Eventually Francis' directives were inadequate to guide the growing numbers of women leaving homes and following St. Clare. In response to a letter written to Pope Honorius II from Cardinal Hugolino concerning the new foundations being made for religious women in the Spoleto valley, Pope Honorius II made these new foundations exempt from the jurisdiction of the local bishops and placed them directly under the Pope.¹⁷ In it, he makes note that "[some people] are not afraid, thereby, of impeding the salutary resolutions of these women."¹⁸ Remember, that many of the early followers of Clare were nobility and were "fleeing the pomp and wealth of this world"¹⁹ and might need the protection of someone not in the local community where family influence was widespread. The Pope removed local influence and personally took the nuns of St. Clare under his protection.

¹⁵ Joan Mueller, *St. Clare of Assisi: Letters to Agnes*. p.xvii-xviii.

¹⁶ Form of Life Given to St. Clare and her Sisters, in Armstrong and Brady, *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*. New York, Paulist Press. 44.

¹⁷ Letter of Pope Honorius III to Cardinal Hugolino in Regis Armstrong OFM, *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents: The Lady*. New York: New City Press, 2006, p.71.

¹⁸ Letter of Pope Honorius III, 72.

¹⁹ Ibid.

The Privilege of Poverty:

Finally, between the end of the Lateran Council and his death in 1216, Pope Innocent III, wrote in his own hand the text of the Privilege of Poverty which stated, “No one can compel you to receive possessions.”²⁰

Hugolino’s Rule:

Shortly after, Cardinal Hugolino (1219) wrote a rule (FLHug) guiding the fledgling foundations.²¹ It was designed to ensure a more stable form of life, with both more formal spiritual and administrative assistance. Some foundations of women were experiencing neglect due to the wandering nature of the Franciscan friar communities. However, this Rule was based upon the Rule of St. Benedict (since after the 4th Lateran Council of 1214, all new foundations of religious orders must use an already existing Rule),²² specified enclosure and use of the Benedictine version of the Divine Office²³. Francis’ Rule for the brothers was exempt from this requirement since it was already approved. However, Clare’s vision of life was not exempt even though it was based upon Francis’ Form of Life.

Needless to say, the use of a Benedictine Rule in a Franciscan foundation invited difficulties. The most serious difficulty for the Poor Ladies concerned poverty. Clare yearned to remain poor as the Crucified Christ and to maintain the “privilege of poverty” which was living without possessions. However, church leaders were protective of its women and feared neglect by their brothers in religion. Without assurance for the upkeep of the monastery, the church feared for the well being of women religious. Clare had no such fear. She relied on the Lord to provide as He had for the birds of the air and for her brother Franciscans.

Hugolino’s rule also began defining enclosure as more restrictive than it had been in actual practice and became more concrete and severe in subsequent rules. Although “San Damiano was an eremitical community right from the start...they [the Poor Ladies] sought to live their life of prayer in isolation and separation from the world. Enclosure was not added there later but was there from the beginning. However, it is no contradiction that right from the beginning Francis and Clare thought of San Damiano

²⁰ PrPov 84.

²¹ FLHug. 73. .

²² Constitution 13 (Ne nimia...moasteriis praesidere). *Disciplinary Decrees of the General Councils Text, Translations, and Commentary*, H.J. Schroeder, O.P. (New York: Herder, 1937) 255.

²³ Joan Mueller, *St. Clare of Assisi; Letters to Agnes*, p. 10.

as being an open community...In this sense...the spirituality of enclosure (at least as it emerges from Ugolino's Constitutions) was never introduced at San Damiano."²⁴ "Seclusion for her [Clare] is really openness to the world, isolation is the fullness of spiritual communion."²⁵ There is evidence,²⁶ however, that the early Poor Ladies, allowed a more relaxed enclosure when it involved the brothers of Francis, the sick and certain ecclesial authorities.

Clare appealed directly to Pope Innocent III for a papal exemption to Hugolino's Rule citing the need for the privilege of poverty. As the numbers of Poor Clares greatly increased, many were not satisfied with Hugolino's Rule and its insistence on professing the Benedictine rule. Agnes of Prague, a noble woman who rejected a royal suitor in favor of a life as a Poor Clare, explicitly asked that the Benedictine rule be omitted from the Form of Life (Rule) used in her monastery.²⁷

Dispensation from the Privilege of Poverty:

In 1227, Cardinal Hugolino, now Pope Gregory IX, dispensed the Poor Ladies from the Privilege of Poverty and removed the Friars Minor as chaplains except for those to whom special permission had been given by the Apostolic See.²⁸ Clare moved into action. She said, "Let him now take away from us all the brothers since he has taken away those who provide us with the food that is vital." At once she sent back to the Minister all the brothers, not wanting to have the questors who acquired corporal bread when they could not have the questors for spiritual bread."²⁹ The Poor Ladies' fast from bodily food, when faced with a fast from spiritual food, did not go unnoticed. In 1228, Pope Gregory IX restored the Privilege of Poverty and the ministry of the friar minors to the community.

Innocent IV's Rule:

The next pope, Pope Innocent IV found many women's monasteries throughout the world facing extreme deprivation from their male order's neglect and was forced to intervene in many cases. In order to force the mendicant orders to assume jurisdiction over the convents associated with them,³⁰ he wrote a rule which reconfirmed the Hugolinian rule and promulgated his rule of 1247 (FLInn)³¹ which omits reference to

²⁴ Marco Bartoli, *Clare of Assisi*, p.85-6.f

²⁵ Marco Bartoli, *Clare of Assisi*, p. 97.

²⁶ Murray Bodo, *Clare: A Light in the Garden*, p. 45 (footnote).

²⁷ Regis Armstrong, OFM, *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents, The Lady* p. 89

²⁸ *Quo Elongati* in *St. Francis of Assisi, Early Documents, The Saint* p.575.

²⁹ LCI 312.

³⁰ Margaret Carney, *The First Franciscan Woman: Clare of Assisi and Her Form of Life*, p. 75.

³¹ FLInn 89-106.

the Benedictine rule, lessens fasting, and permits possessions while still refusing the full privilege of poverty. It did however; reflect more of the Poor Ladies' wishes to have their charism and ideals incorporated into the Church's official documents. The rule of 1247 was enforced by papal decree in spite of the fact that it was not widely accepted by the Poor Clare communities.

St. Clare's Rule of Life:

In the meantime, St. Clare never gave up her pursuit of the privilege of poverty and constantly petitioned the pope to let her fully follow the ideals of the Franciscan charism.³² Clare wrote her own Rule of Life (FLCI) based upon the Franciscan insistence on poverty and began her long efforts to win its approval. This Rule was the first Rule ever written by a woman³³ and reflected many provisions from the Later Rule of the friars.³⁴ Clare continued to press for the passage of her rule even when the Pope visited, by now the well loved holy Clare. Finally by 1250 Pope Innocent IV absolved the Poor Clares from following his rule of 1247 but still did not allow the privilege of poverty.

St. Clare's Rule described a life which "had three salient characteristics: life in common, work with their own hands and, above all the choice of poverty... This choice of absolute poverty led to what could be called the economic paradox of San Damiano: working in order to give away, and begging in order to live. From such a perspective, work was not an economic factor, but instead it became the hallmark of the choice of poverty."³⁵

Likewise, all of the sisters worked with their own hands. In other monasteries, there were those who "served" and were called "lay sisters," and then there were those who primarily prayed, were well educated and were from aristocratic backgrounds and were called "choir nuns." "At San Damiano, too, there were sisters who were called "those who served;" these were the sisters who went outside the monastery as occasion required. At San Damiano, however, "those who served" were not a category apart, for all the sisters were obliged to work and the work itself was not divided into more or less servile work."³⁶

³² Regis Armstrong, OFM, *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents, The Lady*, p. 89.

³³ Regis Armstrong, OFM, *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents, The Lady*, p.106.

³⁴ Margaret Carney OSF, *The First Franciscan Woman: Clare of Assisi and Her Form of Life*, Appendix: Comparison of the Rules, p. 260-261.

³⁵ Marco Bartoli, *Clare of Assisi*, p.75.

³⁶ Marco Bartoli, *Clare of Assisi*, p. 66.

In addition, Clare's way of life in common was quite democratic for its time. All sisters voted upon acceptance of a Candidate since this new woman would impact the whole community. Abbesses were elected by the community and were considered servants of all, and the Abbess was to confer with all of her sisters about what concerned the welfare of the community.³⁷

Finally after years of praying and lobbying for her own Rule of Life, on August 9th, 1253, approval was granted for Clare's written Rule of Life and was delivered to her one day before her death along with the papal bull of Pope Innocent IV. On the original manuscript, found in the folds of her mantle, Pope Innocent IV writes: "For reasons known to me and the protector of the monastery, so be it!" It was also noted that Blessed Clare touched and kissed it many times out of devotion.³⁸ St. Clare died on August 11th, 1253, secure in the knowledge that the precious Privilege of Poverty and the unique Poor Clare Way of Life was accepted and blessed by the Church.

Spirituality of St. Clare

St. Clare always described herself and her order as "the little plant of our Father Francis." Thus, she acknowledges the role of Francis in the development of the feminine expression of the Franciscan charism.

The Clarian (that which is attributed to St. Clare) charism, is essentially Franciscan in nature with the same emphasis on following the gospel life, conformity to the Crucified, poverty, simplicity, and the brotherhood/sisterhood of all creation. St. Clare articulated these qualities in a specific contemplative and feminine expression.

One of the best ways to understand Clare's spirituality is through her writings, especially in her letters to Agnes of Prague. In them, she has described her contemplative path of spiritual marriage to the Crucified, her use of the mirror image, mystical marriage/spiritual motherhood and holy unity. Clare's writings do not dwell on the costs of living the gospel life but are filled with descriptions and blessings that such a life obtains. Like Francis, she dwells in the praise of God; the result of continual self offering, prayer and sacrifice. Her spirituality is not a negation of life but a whole hearted turning to the fullness of Love.

Clare's Contemplative Approach to Prayer:

³⁷ FICI 106-128.

³⁸ Regis Armstrong, OFM, *St. Clare of Assisi: Early Documents, The Lady*, p. 106-7.

“O most noble Queen, gaze [on him], consider [him], 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 and, in the Book of Life, your name shall be called glorious among people.”³⁹

These are Clare’s directives for contemplation to Agnes of Prague. Notice the difference between Clare’s directives and the classic steps of *lectio divina* (or the monastic path.) Classic *lectio divina* begins with “*Lectio*” (to hear the Word of God), “*Meditatio*” (to reflect upon the Word), “*Oratio*” (the Word touches the heart), and finishes with “*Contemplatio*” (to rest in God). “Clare begins with a “visual reading,” a gazing on the image of the crucified Christ, which leads to meditation or consideration of Christ, then to contemplation and imitation of Christ. Whereas the monastic path ends at contemplation, for Clare, the goal of prayer is imitation. It is not simply that we arrive at union with God; rather, it is that we *become* what we love. Prayer forges us into the likeness of the beloved, and thus it brings Christ to life in the believer. This is the evangelical life; bringing Christ to life by participating in the Christ mystery. Prayer is the energy of evangelical life because it transforms the desire for gospel life into the practice of gospel living. Clare’s template of prayer-gaze-consider-contemplate-imitate is the template of evangelical life and the relationship with God that makes this life alive.”

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This transformation is the heart of Clare’s spirituality. We cannot bring Christ to others if we are not transformed into His likeness. Clare wrote how this develops by describing it to her friend Agnes of Prague: “*Place your mind before the mirror of eternity! Place your soul in the brilliance of glory! Place your heart in the figure of 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.*”⁴¹ Notice the three stages of this transformation.⁴² Initially there is a stop, rest, contemplation, (*Place your mind before the mirror of eternity, place your soul in the brilliance of glory!*) followed by a movement of the will and the emotions (*place your heart in the figure of the divine substance!*) and finally, is the place of pleasure and delight (“*So that you too may feel what His friends feel as they taste the hidden sweetness that God has reserved from the beginning for those who love Him!*”) Clare knows very well the passion and poverty of the Lord. She also knows the sweetness of the Lord, for that is what sustains her through her efforts to obtain the privilege of poverty! “*Whose affection excites, Whose contemplation refreshes, Whose kindness fulfills, Whose delight*

³⁹ 2LAg 20-21

⁴⁰ Delia Ilio, *Franciscan Prayer*. p.9-10.

⁴¹ 3LAg 12-14.

⁴² Claire Marie Ledoux, *Clare of Assisi: Her Spirituality Revealed in her Letters*, p. 65-66.

replenishes.”⁴³ “Clare’s way of contemplation is central to relationship with God. It is not the goal but the means of union and transformation.”⁴⁴

The Mirror of the Cross:

St. Clare wrote: “Gaze upon that mirror each day, O Queen and Spouse of Jesus Christ, and continually study your face within it, that you may adorn yourself within and without with beautiful robes, covered, as is becoming the daughter and most chaste bride of the Most High King, with the flowers and garments of all the virtues. Indeed, blessed poverty, holy humility, and inexpressible charity are reflected in that mirror, as, with the grace of God, you can contemplate them throughout the entire mirror.”⁴⁵

Clare, using a common image at the time of the medieval ages, uses the mirror image in two ways. First, Jesus is seen as the mirror of God giving us reflections of the qualities of God. In a mirror, light (the expression of the presence of God) enlivens it. Secondly, the mirror can also remind us that as Christians we are transformed through contemplation; we in turn have to become mirrors and to reflect God.⁴⁶ .

The mirror has three parts: the border, the surface and the depth- each representing the life of Jesus.⁴⁷

The border of the mirror represents the poverty of Christ who was born in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes, the surface refers to His life on earth and the depth refers to the death of Christ on the cross. Like a mirror of the Middle Ages (which are blemished and filled with imperfections), we are also imperfect and do not reflect the full image of Christ until we are transformed by Him. As Clare used the image of the mirror in contemplation, we are urged to contemplate the “mirror of eternity;” we are to become transformed with poverty, humility and love through the image of the Divine (the mirror without blemish) and become who we see, the image of God in whose likeness we were created. “Therefore, that Mirror, suspended on the wood of the Cross, urged those who passed by the way, look and see if there is any suffering like my suffering!”⁴⁸

⁴³ 4 LAg, 11-12.

⁴⁴ Ilia Delio, *Clare of Assisi: A Heart Full of Love*, p. 63.

⁴⁵ 4 LAg 15-18.

⁴⁶ Brian E. Purfield, *Reflects dans le miroir. Images du Christ dans la vie spirituelle de sainte Claire d'Assise* (Paris: Editions franciscaines, 1993), back cover. Translation by Colette Joly Dees. This work appeared first in English as *Reflections in the Mirror: Images of Christ in the Spiritual Life of St. Clare of Assisi* (1989) a dissertation at St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, New York.

⁴⁷ Ledoux, p. 95.

⁴⁸ 4 LAg 24.

As Beth Lynn, OSC states: “The idea here is reflection. All created reality each in its own way is an image of God the creator. We see a finite reflection of God in everyone and everything around us.”⁴⁹ We are challenged to reflect God to others by our lives.

Mystical Marriage/Spiritual Motherhood:

Clare, acknowledging what her sisters and she, herself, had given up by choosing Christ as their spouse instead of a noble marriage, said to Agnes of Prague: “*You have taken the noblest of husbands, the Lord Jesus Christ...*”⁵⁰ Clare saw virginity as the precondition for a much richer human and spiritual fecundity⁵¹ and it was this relationship to the Crucified that was the goal of Poor Clare life: “*Therefore, beloved sister-or better: lady who is worthy of great honour because you are the beloved and the mother and the sister of my Lord Jesus Christ...*”⁵² It was also this relationship that was seen as an invisible martyrdom by the sisters as they were transformed into a mystical union with Christ: “*O Bride of Christ, because, just like the other most holy virgin, saint Agnes, you have been most marvelously wedded to the Lamb without blemish who takes away the sins of the world, for you have lain aside all the emptiness of this world.*”⁵³

For Clare and her sisters, as they were transformed by God in their spiritual marriages, they witnessed how they gave birth to Him to each other and for others. They realized how they bore Him in their bodies and in their lives. In other words, they became mothers of Him as Francis wished. As Ingrid Peterson, OSF puts it, “mystical union which binds the soul to God, inflames the soul with action. It fills the heart with generosity, especially to instruct others in the way of perfection.”⁵⁴

Clare also became “mother” to all of her spiritual daughters who followed her way. She called herself “sister and mother of you” in her final blessing to her sisters and to all of the sisters to come.⁵⁵ She modeled her life after the poor Mary who could only clothe her child in poor little clothes when she admonished her sisters to always dress in poor clothes as the infant was clothed.⁵⁶

Holy Unity:

⁴⁹ Beth Lynn OSC, “Love Willing to Suffer” in *Doing what is Ours to Do: A Clarian Theology of Life, by the Poor Clares of the Holy Name Federation and the Mother Bentivoglio Federation*, p. 27.

⁵⁰ 1 LAg 7

⁵¹ Marco Bartoli, *Clare of Assisi*, p. 128.

⁵² 1 LAg 11

⁵³ 4 LAg 7-8.

⁵⁴ Ingrid Peterson, 287

⁵⁵ BICI 6.

⁵⁶ FLCI, 2, 24.

Because of Clare's mystical marriage to the Crucified, she united herself to the Godhead itself (Holy Unity) through the transforming power of prayer. In the prologue to the Rule of the Poor Clares', given to them by Father Francis when the rule is confirmed by Cardinal Rainaldo, it states: "According to [this form of life] you should live together in unity of spirits..."⁵⁷ The Poor Clares are to show in the unity of their cloistered life with each other, the same unity of the Trinitarian love among Father, Son and Spirit which we share in our life with God. As Pope John Paul II in *Vita Consecrata* writes: "Fraternal life, whereby consecrated persons strive to live in Christ with one heart and soul, is put forward as an eloquent witness to the Trinity. It proclaims the Father, who desires to make of all humanity one family. It proclaims the incarnate Son, who gathers the redeemed into unity, pointing the way by his example, his prayer, his words and above all his death, which is a source of reconciliation for a divided and scattered community. It proclaims the Holy Spirit as the principle unity of the Church, wherein he ceaselessly raises up spiritual families in fraternal communities."⁵⁸ The Eucharist is the sacrament of this life together. As one Poor Clare wrote, "In this Presence we are made one in Triune Love. Together we call upon the Spirit, together we join ourselves to Jesus to praise and thank our God. "And all of us with our unveiled faces like mirrors reflecting the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the image that we reflect in brighter and brighter glory (2Cor. 3:18)."⁵⁹

Therefore, the Poor Clare's life is to mirror the Trinity of God, not only to each other but to the outside world. It is in this relationship where the "enclosed" eremitical lifestyle of the Poor Clares' opens out to embrace all creation.

The Poor Clares Today and the Secular Franciscan Order

The Poor Clare monasteries today, founded nearly 134 years ago in the United States, are independent from each other but loosely affiliated into Federations. You will find many "flavors" of Poor Clare life, ranging from monasteries tracing their roots directly back to San Damiano, Capuchin Poor Clares, Poor Clares nuns derived from Third Order contemplatives, as well as Colettine Poor Clares (those tracing their roots to the reforms of St. Colette). Some monasteries are very traditional with floor length habits and veils, with bare feet, sandals or shoes, and some have shorter habits with or without veils. Color is also variable ranging from white in warm climates to light beige to dark brown. All profess the same Rule but with different traditions and

⁵⁷ Prologue to The Form of Life of St. Clare of Assisi, in *The Lady: St. Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, edited and translated by Regis J. Armstrong, New City Press, New York, NY, 2006.

⁵⁸ Pope John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 37.

⁵⁹ Mary Frances Hone OSC, "God Is Happening: A Trinitarian Theology" in *Doing What Is Ours To Do* p.65.

interpretations. In any event, they are all Poor Clare nuns professing the Rule of St. Clare with the four vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and enclosure.

Not every Secular Franciscan fraternity is blessed to be geographically close to the Second Franciscan Order. But to those who are not geographically close, you can still develop a relationship. (Please see the website: <http://poorclare.org> for a list of monasteries by state.) Since the Poor Clares are an enclosed contemplative order, mail, email or phone contact can be maintained. Attending the Transitus of St. Clare along with her feast day mass celebrations can strengthen ties with the Second Franciscan Order. Occasional fraternity visits to a monastery might be arranged. Some Poor Clare monasteries (but not all) offer spiritual direction which is a great help to a Secular Franciscan. Relationships with a Poor Clare monastery enrich a Secular Franciscan fraternity with prayer support, fraternity, and sharing of the Franciscan charism. We can offer our prayers, material assistance (driving, shopping etc) and donations to assist our sisters. Our Second Order sisters have much to offer the Secular Franciscan order and we, as Secular Franciscans, have much to offer in return.

Sample Reflection Questions:

1. As you use St. Clare's "gaze, consider, contemplate and imitate" describe its impact on your life.
2. In what ways have you been drawn to Imitate the Crucified? In what ways has it transformed your life?
3. How do you see Christ in your "mirror?" How are you a "mirror" of Christ?
4. Describe how by your intended consecration as a Secular Franciscan, you will give birth to God for others.
5. Describe ways you can give evidence of unity with the Father, Son and Spirit, in your life in fraternity.
6. Do you have a relationship with the Poor Clares? What has this meant to you? If not, how can you foster one?

Ending Prayer Ritual

The Formator reads from the Legend of St. Clare, Chapter X, “The Miracle of the Multiplication of Bread.”

“There was only one [scrap of] bread in the monastery when both hunger and the time for eating arrived. After calling the refectorian, the saint told her to divide the bread and to send part [of it] to the brothers, keeping the rest for the sisters. From this remaining part she told her to cut fifty [pieces] according to the number of ladies and to place them on the table of poverty. When the devoted daughter replied to her “We’ll need to have the ancient miracles of Christ happen to receive fifty pieces from such a small [piece of] bread,” the mother responded by saying:” Confidently do whatever I say, child.”

The daughter hurried to fulfill the command of her mother; the mother hurried to direct her pious aspirations for her sisters to her Christ. Through a divine gift, that little piece increased in the hands of the one breaking it and a generous portion existed for each one in the convent.”

(Time for reflection of the reading)

At the end of the reflection, the Formator prays the Blessing of St. Clare over the bread with hand raised as all bow their heads.

Blessing Attributed to St. Clare*

"In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit Amen.

May the Lord, bless you and keep you. May He show His face to you and be merciful to you. May He turn his countenance to you and give you peace.

I, Clare, a handmaid of Christ, a little plant of our holy Father Francis, a sister and mother of you (omitted - "and the other Poor Sisters"), although unworthy, ask our Lord Jesus Christ through His mercy and through the intercession of His most holy Mother Mary, of Blessed Michael the Archangel and all the holy angels of God, and of all His men and women saints, that the heavenly Father give you and confirm for you this most holy blessing in heaven and earth. On earth, may He increase His grace and virtues among His servants and Handmaids of His Church Militant. In heaven, may He exalt and glorify you in His Church Triumphant among all His men and women saints.

I bless you in my life and after my death as much as I can and more than I can with all the blessings with which the Father of mercies has and will have blessed His sons and daughters in heaven and on earth Amen.

Always be lovers of God and your souls and the souls of you Brothers and Sisters (changed from Sisters), and always be eager to observe what you have promised the Lord.

May the Lord be with you always and, wherever you are, may you be with Him always. Amen"

- **Blessing sung and composed by the Order of St. Clare nuns, Andover Massachusetts. Used with permission.**

At the end of the Blessing, each person in Formation, tears off a bit of bread and consumes it.

ST. CLARE OF ASSISI: THE IMPORTANT EVENTS OF HER LIFE

- 1193 July 16 Clare Offreduccio is born in Assisi, Italy
- 1199 The Offreduccio family is exiled from Assisi to Perugia
- 1206 Francis' conversion, his prayer before the crucifix at San Damiano, he repairs the church and predicts the coming of the Poor Ladies
- 1209 Francis' Rule receives the approval of Pope Innocent III
- 1210 Clare hears Francis preach in Assisi
- 1212 Palm Sunday, March 20, Clare makes her flight to the Portiuncula and receives the habit from Francis
- 1212 Clare is moved from San Paolo in Bastia to Sant' Angelo di Panzo
- 1212 Clare begins the foundation at San Damiano with her sister Agnes – originally called the order of San Damiano (the Damianites), commonly known as 'The Poor Ladies'
- 1214 Sister Bolvina, Clare's companion, founded a community of Damianites in Spello
- 1215 Pope Innocent III calls the Fourth Lateran Council
- 1216 Clare reluctantly, but obediently, accepts the role of Abbess of San Damiano
- 1215-16 Pope Innocent III grants Clare and the Poor Ladies the Privilege of Poverty
- 1217 Cardinal Hugolino arrives in Tuscany as Papal Legate
- 1219 Cardinal Hugolino issues a Rule based on that of St. Benedict, but not including Privilege of Poverty or ministry by the Friars Minor
- 1219 Agnes is sent as Abbess to Monticello, near Florence
- 1224 The beginning of Clare's illness; Francis receives the Stigmata
- 1226 Oct 3 Francis dies at the Portiuncula
- 1227 Pope Gregory IX (formerly Cardinal Hugolino) dispenses the Poor Ladies from Clare's ideals of Poverty and removes the Friars as chaplains
- 1228 Gregory IX restores the Privilege of Poverty and ministry by the Friars Minor

- 1229 Princess Agness, the daughter of the King of Bohemia, establishes a monastery in Prague, becomes its Abbess and eventually becomes St. Agnes of Prague
- 1230 Francis' body is transferred to the Basilica of St. Francis
- 1240 Saracens attack the monastery of San Damiano... Clare repels the attack with her prayer before the Blessed Sacrament
- 1241 Miracle of the liberation of the city of Assisi from Vitale d'Aueria on June 22 by the intercession of Clare before the Blessed Sacrament
- 1247 Rule of Pope Innocent IV lessens fasting, permits possessions. The "Damianites" to the Franciscan Order. Rule of St. Benedict abandoned
- 1250 Pope Innocent IV declares Poor Ladies not bound to his Rule
- 1252 Cardinal Raynaldus approves Clare's Rule, September 16
- 1252 Clare's fourth and last known letter to Agnes of Prague
- 1253 150 monasteries of Poor Ladies have been established throughout Europe
- 1253 Pope Innocent IV visits Clare at San Damiano
- 1253 Aug. 8 Clare has a vision of the Virgin Mary with heavenly virgins
- 1253 Aug. 9 Clare's Rule is finally approved by Papal Bull 'Solet annure'
- 1253 Aug. 11 Clare dies peacefully at San Damiano
- 1253 Oct. 18 Pope Innocent IV orders inquiry into Clare's life
- 1253 Nov Death of Clare's sister, (St.) Agnes of Assisi
- 1255 Aug. 15 St. Clare is canonized by Pope Alexander IV (formerly Cardinal Raynaldus)
- 1260 The Poor Ladies are transferred from San Damiano to the Basilica of St. Clare within the walls of Assisi
- 1263 Rule of Pope Urban IV - The Poor Ladies from here on will take the name "The Order of St. Clare"
- 1850 Aug. 30 Sarcophagus and remains of St. Clare are found
- 1872 Clare's body is placed in the new crypt of Basilica of St. Clare
- 1893 Original Rule of St. Clare is found in a fold of her mantle

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Acknowledgments:

I would like to thank and acknowledge the Poor Clares of the Andover Massachusetts monastery for the use of their beautiful sung Blessing of St. Clare, their prayers, encouragement and review of this material. You are such a gift!

I would also like to thank the Secular Franciscans of the St. Elizabeth of Hungary Region, in particular to Jackie Walsh SFO, Regional Minister and Miriam Kennedy SFO, Regional Vice Minister and the St. Francis of Assisi Fraternity, Secular Franciscan Order, Andover MA for their prayers, review and support also.

Lastly, I would like to thank the Franciscan Friars of the Franciscan Center, Andover MA for their fraternal support and friendship as an invaluable part of the Franciscan family. Without their guidance, my identity as a Secular Franciscan would not be complete.