



Publication Name

**PROPOSITUM**

Vol. 7 - No. 2 - December

Period

December

Year

2003

Volume

7

Number

2

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## Clare of Assisi Lover of Life

**A journey of discovery on the occasion of the celebration  
of the 750th anniversary of Saint Clare's death**

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### FOREWORD

'See more clearly with Clare' So runs the title of a seminar that is being offered to young religious by the Interfranciscan Association (= INFAG Interfranzis-kanische Arbeitsgemeinschaft) scheduled for the spring of 2004. Clare of Assisi, this fascinating woman, this incomparable Saint, she it was who has seen clearly and recognised early on what really matters in life and she acts upon it.

In her Testament, Clare looks back upon her life and the beginnings of the community of Sisters with whom she has lived in San Damiano near Assisi, where they lived together in a monastic form of life. She speaks of her conversion, her vocation and of the close connection they have with the Order of Friars Minor. She recalls Saint Francis, the Founder, the Planter, the Helpmate in the service of Christ (Cf. TestCI 37 and 49), and she calls herself by no other name but his 'plantula', 'his tender little plant'.

But Clare is Francis' equal when it comes to comparing her with Francis. She who has called St Francis 'the true lover and follower of Jesus Christ' (TestCI 5), became herself an ardent lover and a radical seeker after God and follower of Christ.

And she finds her way, for 'the Son of God has become for us the Way' (TestCI 5).

Jesus Christ is the middle point of all Clare's thoughts, the focus of her love. He is the Mirror, in which she will look every day. In Him she recognises the depths of the Divine Mysteries, the essence of the external world and the innermost nature of her own person. The essential nature of the life of Jesus, in Whose footsteps she seeks to follow, consists, for her, in His humble descent into the poverty of human life, where the wealth that is God's will be encountered.

The spirituality of St Clare is, on the one hand, very much the same as that of St Francis, but on the other hand, she is more finely attuned, more 'womanly' in her empathy towards the most apparently insignificant movements of the human heart.

Few in number are her writings, yet, though they offer us no easy access to contemplating the humble

Jesus, they are in the deepest sense simple. Only after the passage of time can the deep spiritual sustenance contained in the writings of St Clare be apparent to our modern analytical way of looking, used as we are to seeing only the surface meaning of things.

See more clearly with Clare! Her insights, result of decades of contemplation, will lead us into the deep clarity that satisfies our yearnings, to look upon God, to contemplate Him.

*Sister Marianne Jungbluth*  
*Franciscan Sister of the Holy Family*  
*Würzburg (Germany) - November 2003*

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## **Christ has become for us the Way**

### **Elements in the spirituality of St Clare**

*"To live in this evangelical conversion  
of life in a spirit of prayer,  
of poverty and of humility"*  
(Reg TOR 1,2)

### **To follow in the path of Poverty and to imitate the Life of St Clare.**

In his legacy to St Clare and her Sisters, St Francis urges them to follow Christ in His poverty and in His life. Poverty and Life : these two words express something quintessential about the Form of Life of St Clare and her spirituality. In the Eighth Chapter of her Rule, St Clare writes:

*"Let the sisters not appropriate anything, neither a house nor a place nor anything at all; instead, as pilgrims and strangers in this world who serve the Lord in poverty and humility, let them confidently send for alms. Nor should they be ashamed, since the Lord made Himself poor in this world for us. This is that summit of the highest poverty which has established you, my dearest sisters, heiresses and queens of the kingdom of heaven; it has made you poor in the things [of this world] but exalted you in virtue. Let this be your portion which leads into the land of the living (cf. Ps 141:6). Clinging totally to this, my most beloved sisters, do not wish to have anything else forever under heaven for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and His most holy mother." (Rule of St Clare Chapter 8, 1-6)*

Here St Clare places the unmistakable mark of her own life of poverty upon the legacy left to her by St Francis. In doing so, St Clare indicates the context in which poverty for her plays its part. Poverty has significance for the life the community leads and for its relationship with God. Clare is not stating this for the sake of Poverty as such. Poverty is not the final purpose of her life. Poverty is the basis of the ability of the Sisters to establish relationship with each other and the precondition of an intensive relationship to God Himself in Christ Jesus. So Poverty is there to create such a relationship and to make it possible. In living out her life, St Clare discovers that every interpersonal relationship, and especially the relationship to God Himself, requires its space, it needs freedom, so to speak, from things that can keep life entangled, so that it can be receptive and sensitive towards our fellow human beings and more precisely to be receptive and sensitive to discerning God's expressed Will. Poverty in Clare's life is the servant to this end, that is, 'Poverty' is the creation of a space in which we can be open to the needs of our fellow human beings and to be there for God. Thus it is that Clare arranges that her style of life be based upon a radical Poverty, to which the duty of manual labour is part and parcel, to which, too, the patient acceptance of physical illness and the readiness to resist accumulating wealth in a vain attempt to ensure

material security. If Clara struggles in her time to wring from the Pope his assent to the 'Privilege of Poverty', which allows her to refuse any endowment in the form of possessions, it is because she wishes to create the preconditions necessary for establishing this receptivity towards God, humankind and the world that she wishes to achieve by living a life of Poverty, by deliberately renouncing all the trappings of security that would barricade her off from God and from the world. Instead of accumulating wealth and property, and providing for security, these things which divide people from each other and from God, Clare lives her life based upon a Form of Life imbued with the spirit of Poverty that requires the exercise of mutual love, that reflects God's Love for humankind.

For St Clare, Poverty is essential to the way she lives: In her Testament she writes:

*"After the most high heavenly Father saw fit in His mercy and grace to enlighten my heart, that I should do penance according to the example and teaching of our most blessed father Francis, a short while after his conversion, I, together with a few sisters whom the Lord had given me after my conversion, willingly promised him obedience, as the Lord gave us the light of His grace through his wonderful life and teaching." (Test. Clare 24-26)*

With these concluding words of her Testament, St Clare alludes to the words of St Francis himself which he uses in his Testament as the title to his Form of Life, thus characterising it:

*"The Lord granted me. Brother Francis, to begin to do penance in this way." (Test. 1)*

Following the example of Francis, Clare understands a life lived according to Poverty as a life of penance. The word 'Penance' for the modern reader of today irresistibly recalls the gloomy depths to which medieval penitential practices would descend - flagellation and exaggerated fasting and so on. Of course, we do find such exaggerated fasting in the way St Clare lived her own life, which, on health grounds, was forbidden both by St Francis himself and the Bishop of Assisi. Yet Clare never demands that others should follow such extremes of abnegation in fasting and penance. On the contrary, she advises others to practise moderation. For example, she writes to Agnes of Prague:

*"Now concerning those matters that you have asked me to clarify for you: which are the specific feasts our most glorious Father Saint Francis urged us to celebrate in a special way by a change of food - feasts of which, I believe, you already have some knowledge - I propose to respond to your love.*

*Your prudence should know, then, that except for the weak and the sick, for whom [Saint Francis] advised and admonished us to show every possible discernment in matters of food, none of us who are healthy and strong should eat anything other than Lenten fare, either on ferial days or on feast days. Thus, we must fast every day except Sundays and the Nativity of the Lord, on which days we may have two meals. And on ordinary Thursdays everyone may do as she wishes, so that she who does not wish to fast is not obliged. However, we who are well should fast every day except on Sunday and on Christmas.*

*During the entire Easter week, as the writing of Saint Francis tells us, and on the feasts of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of the holy Apostles, we are not obliged to fast, unless these feasts occur on a Friday. And, as I have already said, let us who are well and strong always eat Lenten fare.*

*But our flesh is not bronze nor is our strength that of stone (Jb 6:12). No, we are frail and inclined to every bodily weakness! I beg you, therefore, dearly beloved, to refrain wisely and prudently from an indiscreet and impossible austerity in the fasting that you have undertaken. And I beg you in the Lord to praise the Lord by your very life, to offer the Lord your reasonable service (Rm 12:1) and your sacrifice always seasoned with salt". (3 Letter Agnes of Prague 29-41)*

This excerpt from Clare's Third Letter to Agnes shows not only Clare's reasonable attitude and approach to fasting but it also reveals her sensitivity, her ability to empathise with the situation and the problems of other Sisters. Here too it is obvious that for Clare dealing with penitential and ascetic practices such as fasting is not for the sake of gaining religious merits or of duties imposed but rather its purpose is to open up one's life so as to encounter God. As in the case of Francis, so too Clare's approach in this matter is

close to the Biblical concept of 'conversion of life'. For Clare, what matters is the biblical 'conversion', a conversion of life to be lived for God and for fellow human beings. For her, life is just that: to be there for the praise and glory of the Lord God. A life of penance is then a path to be pursued, a path of conversion, of loving and praising God and of dedication to God in Christ Jesus. For Clare, Poverty and a life of penance are the basic foundations, in the Gospel sense, which make the human person open and receptive to the Gifts of God which He in His Grace wishes to pour out upon us.

### **Sisters given to me by the Lord**

A life of penance in the spirit of the Gospel, which finds its practical expression in the practice of Poverty, is associated in Clare's view with fraternity, a loving sisterliness. St Clare herself states this for us in the 6th Chapter of her Rule the so-called Form of Life of St Francis which the latter composed for Clare and her Sisters:

*"Because 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 to always have that same loving care and solicitude for you as [I have] for them."* (Rule Clare Chapter 6, 3-4)

This text of St Francis', which Clare transmits to us, proclaims in a few brief phases those basic life-guiding principles that Francis drew from out his experience of a living Faith to give to Clare and her Sisters on their path through life.

Clare and her Sisters have elected to live according to the Perfection of the Holy Gospel. The Good News of the Gospel is the actual foundation of their Form of Life. The dynamic thrust of this Good News is directed towards establishing a relationship with God the Father, in the Holy Spirit, with Whom the Sisters have been espoused - to use the language of their age. Life led according to the Gospel, therefore, results in an encounter with God, in a relationship to God. This intense relationship with God cannot be lived in solitude. Clare comes to realise, as does Francis, that a relationship with God that is lived in accord with the Gospel implies relating to one's fellow men and women, which in practice means to Brothers and Sisters in religion. Her fellow-nuns are for Clare none other than gifts of God. Because the Gospel cannot be lived in solitude, Clare wants to live the Gospel in the company of other women, in company with the Brothers around St Francis and in the greater communion of saints in the Church. The Word of God, if It is to be understood aright, always creates a community, and it is only in the relationship with our neighbour - in Clare's case with each of her Sisters in religion - that the Word of the Gospels can be really alive. For this reason, Clare deliberately eschews the eremitic form of life and her Community of Sisters is no Order of anchorites either. In the loving and painstaking construction of a form of common life, Clare wants to put into effect her Gospel calling. She is ready to fight for the spirit of this life led in common in community. When the official Church seeks to prohibit contact with the friars, Clare and her Sisters begin what is perhaps the first hunger strike in the history of the Church. 'If it is not permitted us to break Spiritual Bread together,' she is reported to have said, 'then we want no earthly bread at all.' Clare gets her way, not because she is incorrigibly obstinate, but because she is utterly convinced that life lived according to the Gospel does not, must not lead into a solitude that is alienated from the world, but on the contrary, must come into the middle of this world, into a community of Brothers and Sisters.

### **The Crib and the Cross**

Poverty, a life of penance, and a life lived in community as the expression of a life in communion with God: for Clare, these three form the firm foundation on which she discovers the very core of her faith. Through her life of Poverty and her life of penance in community with her Sisters, Clare gains an insight into the deeper significance of what the Son of God preaches and proclaims from Crib and Cross. Gripped by what she experiences in her love for Jesus Christ laid in a manger and nailed to a cross, she

shares these in her letters to Agnes of Prague:

*"Look at the border of this mirror, that is, the poverty of Him Who was placed in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes.*

*O marvellous humility!*

*O astonishing poverty!*

*The King of angels,*

*the Lord of heaven and earth,*

*is laid in a manger!*

*Then, at the surface of the mirror, consider the holy humility, the blessed poverty, the untold labours and burdens that He endured for the redemption of the whole human race. Then, in the depth of this same mirror, contemplate the ineffable charity that led Him to suffer on the wood of the Cross and to die there the most shameful kind of death ... From this moment, then, O Queen of our heavenly King, let yourself be inflamed more strongly with the fervour of charity." (4 Letter to Agnes, 19 -27)*

Clare is overwhelmed by this Love of God's. That the Great, the Most High, the Lord Himself has become Man out of Love for humankind, has become Man to redeem His people! Crib and Cross: before these we stand, before the very core of Clare's spirituality. When all is said and done, it is from the Crib and the Cross that Clare draws her radicality, her Poverty and her Form of Life. Clare is enraptured and fascinated by the message of Love that she reads in the Gospel: God identifies Himself with His lost people by the Incarnation and by the Death upon the Cross of His Son. Clare wanted to give throughout her whole life an adequate response to this Mystery of Faith. In her intuitive relationship to the Crib and the Cross - for her the outward signs of God's Love that seeks out humankind in its abandoned state - Clare feels in the very depths of her soul that she is the recipient of God's gifts to her. Crib and Cross, as signs that humankind has been liberated and given back to life, make it clear to Clare and her Sisters that their life takes its origin deep down at the very wellsprings of the Love which God has for His people. Clare feels that she has been given the gift of Life itself. This attitude that assures her that she has been most richly endowed is imprinted upon her self understanding. She knows that every day she will receive further gifts. Therefore, she wants her Sisters and herself to surrender themselves to God every day of their life and dedicate their life to Him anew. As God gave Himself to humankind in the Crib and on the Cross, so too does Clare give her life and herself, as representing the whole of humankind, to God again and again. Crib and Cross become, therefore, the symbols of a spontaneous sacrificial offering of one's own life in the certainty of finding real life, of finding the fullness of life and everlasting happiness. When Clare and her Sisters perceive this greater happiness to be found in the living encounter with the God-Man Jesus Christ, they can renounce every form of earthly wealth and worldly reputation. Their renunciation of property, honour and profit is no polemical abstinence directed against the world and the treasures of this world. But Clare discovers while contemplating the Crib and the Cross a far greater wealth that will become for her the very substance of her life and her hope of eternal life. Her relationship to the Child in the Crib and to the dying Jesus on the Cross will become for her that which will fulfil her life, filling it with meaning and significance. This means, of course, that the wealth of this world is simply no longer needed. In the firm assurance that this is so, Clare writes to Agnes, the daughter of a king, in the following terms:

*"For, though You, more than others, could have enjoyed the magnificence and honour and dignity of the world and could have been married to the illustrious emperor with splendour befitting You and His Excellency, You have rejected all these things and have chosen with Your whole heart and soul a life of holy poverty and destitution. Thus You took a spouse of a more noble lineage, Who will keep Your virginity ever unspotted and unsullied, the Lord Jesus Christ ... in Whose embrace You are already caught up, Who has adorned Your breast with precious stones and has placed priceless pearls in Your ears and has surrounded You with sparkling gems as though blossoms of springtime and placed on Your head a golden crown as a sign of Your holiness .... Be strengthened in the holy service which You have undertaken out of a burning desire for the Poor Crucified." (1 Letter to Agnes of Prague 5 - 13)*

St Clare's Form of Life does not involve any renunciation of the beauty of the world, no denial of joy and

no contempt for material things. Clare does not withdraw herself from the world because she thinks it is dangerous. Whoever sees this in any other light would mistake the real intentions of St Clare. She has discovered, in Jesus Christ, the depths of her relationship to God, and in the face of this relationship, all else is for her second-rate and insignificant. The riches and the pleasures that this world affords lose their power to attract. Clare has found a far greater treasure, that hidden treasure in the field the Bible speaks of, that pearl of great price that the merchant in the Gospel parable gives all his wealth to possess (cf. Matt 4, 44-46). Clare renounces many things so that she may devote herself entirely to Christ Jesus. Into this relationship she then invests the whole of her essentially feminine nature. Clare does not surrender herself and give up the world, but she surrenders herself and the world by enfolding it and herself in this religious relationship.

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## **Application**

- \* Faced with the radical challenges contained in the Gospel, how do we behave in our personal sphere and how do we act at the level of community life?
- \* What elements in a life lived according to the Gospel do we consider important in the formation of our own spirituality?
- \* What dimensions in the life of Jesus can leave their mark upon the way we live in order to make it credible?

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