

# Clare of Assisi: a 'Little Plant' or a unique woman?

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## 1. Introduction

Clare of Assisi's historical legacy has been to describe her as *la pianticella*, the little plant, of Francis of Assisi. Indeed, Clare describes herself as being exactly that, as, for example, in her *Form of Life*: '...Clare, the unworthy handmaid of Christ and the little plant of the most blessed Father Francis...'

But if one wanted to obtain an understanding of the life of Clare of Assisi, an obvious place to start may be the official Church statements about her. Thus, the Church of England's *Common Worship* describes her as: 'Founder of the Minoresses (Poor Clares)'; the Roman Catholic *Daily Roman Missal* explains that 'She founded the Order of Poor Clares'; and an Anglican First Order Brother (Brother Ramon) states that she was '...Abbess of the Second Order of Poor Clares.' The problem with all of those statements is that they are totally wrong. The Order of St Clare (the Poor Clares) was not founded until ten years *after* her death in 1263 by order of Pope Urban IV.

But that is nothing new. Since her death in 1253, many adjectives have been appended to the name of Clare of Assisi: 'Saint', 'little plant' and 'crystal' are just some of the more common examples. But, we will argue, such terms hide the 'real' Clare.

In order to develop our thesis we sketch a short biography of Clare in section 2; reflect upon Clare's spirituality, as expressed in her writings, in section 3; and consider what happened to her community after her death, and the evidence it provides, if any, for supporting our contention that Clare was unique in section 4. Finally, some conclusions are offered.

## 2. Biography of Clare

Clare di Favarone di Offreduccio was the first of three children born in 1193 to a highly prosperous and influential family within Assisi, one of the *majores*, or ruling classes. However, for all her wealth and status, the witnesses in the *Acts* of the Process of Canonisation do not hesitate to describe her as a holy, dedicated young woman even before her "conversion".

But even as a privileged child she still witnessed suffering, pain and death when her family had to leave Assisi for Perugia in 1198 due to the civil war raging in Assisi, one result of which was the destruction of the '*Rocca Maggiore*', a castle built high on rocks above Assisi and inhabited by the family of the Emperor, Frederick Barbarosa. Given later events, it must be considered highly ironical that her future religious inspiration, St Francis, was fighting on the opposite side.

On Palm Sunday, 18<sup>th</sup> March 1212, dressed in her finery, Clare received a palm cross from the Bishop of Assisi. Clare did not go to him in procession, but rather she forced him to come to her, an incident that some commentators suggest meant that the Bishop knew, and approved, of the step that she was about to take; and that the Bishop was calling her to accept the “palm of martyrdom” in imitation of the suffering Christ.

For the same evening Clare left the family home secretly and met Francis at Our Lady of Angels, the *Portiuncula*, where Francis and his brothers received her commitment to follow them in the pursuit of Gospel life, and Francis gave her the tonsure before the altar.

### **3. Was Clare unique?**

We now examine Clare’s spirituality for indications of any unique thoughts. This will be undertaken by examining Clare’s surviving writings: her *Testament*, her *Form of Life* and the four *Letters to Agnes of Prague*.

#### **3.1 Clare’s Testament**

The Testament was probably written, and re-written, between 1247 – 1253 and was intended to be Clare’s definitive statement about the way of life she had wanted to develop at San Damiano, and to act as a guide for future generations of her sisters. It is, therefore, a very important document to consider.

Before considering the document in detail, however, the issue of authenticity has to be addressed. The main problem is that in the Testament it is stated that ‘the Lord Pope Innocent, in whose time we had our beginning’, granted the ‘privilege of holy poverty’ to the poor sisters. (line 42) Although, currently, five copies of the ‘privilege’ exist in manuscript form, recent scholarship considers that these are, at best, mid-fifteenth century forgeries.

Acceptance of the, probable, forgery of the of the 1216 *Privilege*, however does not condemn the *Testament* as a whole to being a forgery, and so we can legitimately consider the Testament as providing insights into Clare’s spirituality.

Clare’s distinct spirituality is summarised in the Testament as: ‘...the God Who was placed poor in the crib, lived poor in the world, and remained naked on the cross...’ (line.45) And: ‘...the Son of God never wished to abandon this holy poverty while He lived in the world.’ (line. 35) This concentration on poverty is one of the key themes for Clare, which underlie her whole spirituality, and which she expands upon in her letters to Agnes of Prague as we discuss in Section 3.3 below.

### 3.2 Clare's Form of Life<sup>1</sup>

The original document, together with the papal bull of Innocent IV, although 'lost' until 1893, is still in existence and is preserved in the *Protomonastery of Saint Clare* in Assisi. Therefore, unlike the Testament, there can be no doubt as to its authenticity. It is a brief, elegant, document consisting of 12 Chapters. In comparison, the *Rule of Benedict* comprises 73 Chapters.

What, however, needs to be understood is that although Clare bases her Form of Life on the *Regula bullata* of Francis, the Benedictine Rule, and the rules of Ugolino and Innocent IV, her voice still sounds clear about the 'most holy life and poverty'. (6: 8)

In Chapter two, Clare states that to anyone who seeks to follow their way of life, the Gospel words: 'go and sell all that she has and take care to distribute the proceeds to the poor.' (2: 7) should be addressed to the applicant. But Clare takes 'poverty' to the utmost limit of a reasonable definition of that word by stating that only sisters who serve outside of the monastery may wear shoes. (2: 21 – 22) As for food: 'Let the sisters fast at all times. They may eat twice on Christmas, however, no matter on what day it happens to fall.' (3: 8 – 9)

In contrast, Benedict's rule states that the religious should be provided with both 'sandals and shoes', and that all apparel should be 'fitted to the wearers.' (Chapter 55) As for food and drink, Benedict declares that there should be two meals a day at which 'Two kinds of cooked food' should be provided, 'and if fruit or fresh vegetables are available, a third dish may also be added.' (Chapter 39) Plus, 'a half bottle of wine a day is sufficient for each.' (Chapter 40)

In Chapter eight, Clare spells out the fact that the sisters should not acquire anything for themselves, and, further, provides a justification for the rule:

'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.' (8: 1 – 6)

### 3.3 Clare's Letters to Agnes of Prague

It is in the four surviving letters of Clare to Agnes of Prague that we find the clearest exposition of Clare's spirituality.

Agnes of Prague, born in 1205, was both a king's daughter and a king's sister. Her lifestyle was, therefore, even more exalted than Clare's had been. But independently of Clare, she had been affected by the preaching of the Friars Minor in Prague, who had arrived in 1225, so much so that in 1232, using her own dowry, she built a hospice in Prague which she turned over to the administration of the *Crosiers of the Red Star*.

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<sup>1</sup> As Armstrong notes, whilst this document is commonly referred to as 'Clare's Rule', the exact Latin text is a 'Form of Life'. (1993: 62, note a)

By examining the four letters as a body of correspondence, several themes emerge, of which poverty, love, the 'sacred exchange' and the use of mirrors are the most important. The letters also reveal that Clare is not afraid to use, at times, erotic language to express her point, and she is able to weave scriptural quotations, legends and advice together in a highly poetic manner.

The concept of the *sacrum commercium*- a sacred exchange, or 'a holy business deal' is an ancient one in Christian spirituality and was well understood in the thirteenth-century. And although the concept of the sacred exchange is based, in fact, in economic reality- what ever we give to God, He will repay a hundredfold; what was unusual is that Clare takes the concept to its limits by extending it to poverty. Thus:

O holy poverty, God promises the kingdom of heaven and, in fact, offers eternal glory and a blessed life to those who possess and desire you!' (1Lag: Lines 15 – 17)

But it is Clare's fourth, and final, letter to Agnes; the one considered by many to be the 'most beautiful', and written very shortly before her death in 1253 that Clare expounds her full view of the importance of 'holy poverty' and, thus, her distinctive theology and spirituality.

In so doing, Clare uses the imagery of a mirror in two ways. First, that Christ can be considered as a mirror which she urges Agnes to 'gaze upon each day...and continually study your face in it.' (4Lag: line 15). By so doing, not only do we compare our selves with perfection, but also we receive '...the poverty, humility, and charity of Christ that shine through the mirror and reflect upon the face of the one peering into it.' The second way that Clare uses the mirror image is by exploiting the very defects in thirteenth-century mirrors, which, unlike a modern one, was distorted and gave a different impression at the edge, the surface and the depth<sup>2</sup>, all of which Clare uses to her, teaching, advantage and which is worth quoting in its entirety:

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. Therefore, that Mirror, suspended on the wood of the Cross, urged those who passed by to consider, saying: "All you who pass by the way, look and see if there is any suffering like my suffering!"<sup>3</sup> (4Lag: lines 18 – 25)

For Clare the only response to that passage is to let herself, and thus Agnes (and the reader), become 'inflamed more strongly with the fervour of charity.' (4Lag: line 27)

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<sup>2</sup> 'The medieval mirror was a thin disk of bronze that was slightly convex on one side. Its border, therefore, reflected an image in an obscure way. Parts of the surface would do the same. Only certain in-depth parts of the mirror reflected an image clearly.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Lam 1:12

#### 4. Events at San Damiano post 1253

Even though Cardinal Rainaldo, the Cardinal Protector and later Pope Alexander IV, approved the Form of Life on 16 September 1252, Clare wanted papal approval. Pope Innocent IV visited Clare sometime in 1253, but he did not approve her Form of Life at that meeting. Instead, he finally gave his approval on the 9<sup>th</sup> August 1253, when he was staying in Assisi, in the bull *Solet annuere*. Clare received the document from a brother on the 10<sup>th</sup> August 1253, and died the following day, the 11<sup>th</sup> August 1253.

Thus Clare died believing that she had protected her sisters and that their distinctive way of life at San Damiano would continue. Unfortunately, events were to prove differently, almost from the moment of her death.

Following the funeral service, Clare's body was taken under armed escort from *San Damiano* to the church of *San Giorgio*<sup>4</sup> within the city of Assisi where she was buried. The poor ladies very quickly decided that they should leave *San Damiano* and, barely 50 days after the death of Clare, they entered into negotiations with the chapter of *San Rufino* on the 1<sup>st</sup> October 1253 with a view to exchanging *San Damiano* for *San Giorgio*.

However, the negotiations proved difficult and the matter was not resolved until 1260, only seven years after Clare's death, when the sisters left San Damiano for the last time and settled in San Giorgio. But in reaching that agreement, the sisters had to pay a price that Clare would surely never have agreed to: they had to accept a number of donations. Never again could the sisters claim to be living in 'highest poverty', and on the 26<sup>th</sup> March 1288, less than 35 years after Clare's death, Pope Nicholas IV, 'in the bull *Devotionis vestrae precibus*...sanctioned the right of the sisters to inherit, to acquire and to retain property'. The Poor Clares themselves had renounced the Privilege of Poverty.

#### 6. Conclusions

In examining Clare's spirituality we identified the core element as being her realisation that if God chose poverty for His son on earth, then she could do no less. She therefore took the Gospel message to sell everything and give the proceeds to the poor literally. She renounced all of her wealth, position in society and status in order that she could lead a simple life in absolute poverty. Her spirituality, combining the themes of poverty leading through love to joy, and her use of the mirror imagery in two distinct ways, had not been thought of in those terms before.

That is the point that marks her as being 'special'; for she was the first to refuse to allow the convent to own things collectively. Other orders had personal, not collective poverty; Clare insisted on both. Further, her concept of poverty extended to food and drink. Only on Sundays and Christmas could the sisters have two meals, but otherwise it was one daily meal of 'Lenten fare'- bread and water. Which probably explains why she was so ill for most of the time that she lived at San Damiano.

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<sup>4</sup> The same church that had been used to house Francis' remains whilst the new basilica was being built.

However, it is the events that occurred after her death that provides the clearest evidence that she was a unique person. Within 50 days of her death, the sisters wanted to leave San Damiano; seven years after her death and the sisters have to accept donations, and within 35 years the right to live in Holy Poverty had been renounced by the pope.

For her part, Clare, from the time of her 'conversion', had only relied upon God to provide for all her needs and to keep her sisters safe. When she died, that trust, and the determination to protect her concept of holy poverty died with her. Other people tried to live a poor, chaste life; other people had mystical experiences; other people had a strong faith in God; but only Clare combined them all into her life, and tried to show others how to live that life. Thus Clare was indeed a unique woman.