

## **St Clare and embracing foundation**

“Place your mind before the mirror of eternity.

Place your soul in the brilliance of glory.

Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance.

And transform your entire being into the image of the Godhead,  
itself through contemplation.” (Clare to Agnes of Prague)

Whilst Francis is described as revolutionary; fanatic; clown; troubadour; saint; acknowledged as an inspiration down the centuries. Clare sought enclosure, prayer, and utter simplicity, to create the interior life. Clare lived between 1194 and 1253, hearing Francis's Lenten preaching at San Giorgio, in 1212, she was captivated. Then secretly enlist his help to live “after the manner of the holy Gospel”. Clare left her privileged life behind; gave away her dowry to the poor, and vow herself to the service of Christ at Porziuncula. Then found seclusion at San Paolo with Benedictine nuns. It may be glean, that as one of Count of Sasso-Rosso daughters, growing up Clare would be familiar with privilege encapsulated in an atmosphere gilded by ostentation. Yet Clare's mother was known for her piety. We may therefore anticipate that the devotion shown by Clare found its first inclinations, through the atmosphere generated in her childhood by maternal example. In these longings, Clare increased her attachment to the deeper spiritual life, making this her life goal. Inspiring daily action, in contrast to the culture that signified the age and society. Following the fury and horror of her father who wished Clare to make an auspicious marriage and had refused several opportunities to marry. Clare moved to Sant'Angelo in Panzo to reside there with the Benedictine nuns. Clare was joined by her younger sister Agnes.

Subsequently, the fledgling community was established permanently within the inauspicious dwelling at San Damiano; as the first community of the Order of Poor Ladies. At this time ,the Order of Poor Clares'.had no written rule, other than Francis short formula. Even after 1215 when Francis had made Clare superior at San Damiano, and of which, Clare continued as abbess for the remaining forty years of her life. The daily life Clare maintained, included manual labour, as well as devotional exercises. In 1219 the rule of St Benedict was given by Cardinal Ugolino to the Ladies. Later Gregory IX removed the Franciscan character of absolute poverty, making the Poor Ladies a Benedictine congregation, this was approved by Honorius III. Whilst the Poor Clares

wished to depend entirely upon the largess found for them by the Friars Minor, under their given rule, this was not allowed. A life completely renouncing of all means of support, was deemed impractical and improper for cloistered women. Given society's aggressive masculine ethos, understandings and expectations of the subjective role of women. Clare face pressure to conform, she was strongly encouraged to accept provision for the community.

Clare consistently refused, even when offered absolution from the violation of her strict vow of poverty. Contenting to the end of her life for adherence to poverty with the new pope Innocent IV. So Clare gained the admiration of the pope, and thereby received this unique privilege. On 9 August 1253 the pope solemnly confirmed the definitive Rule of the Clares' securing for them the precious treasure of poverty, just days before Clare died.

#### *The Historical Landscape:*

The period between 1050 and 1300 was one of great adaptation, self-generating expansion, increased the speed of social change. This evolution ensured that a new impulse had come into law and theology. Strides too were being made toward enlightenment, even control over the physical world. It remains important to understand that Europe then was a place of deep division, accumulation of capital, military aggression, ubiquitous growth. In which kingdoms, towns, rulers, and merchants remained embroiled in conflict fuelled rivalries, in their blood-thirsty search for a sense of supremacy. As the established powers contended with those whose of newly acquired wealth and influence, the whole landscape of society was being changed. At a time of population increase and productivity surplus, fear and resentment toward the wider world fuelled the urge for power and mastery which encouraged within Western Europe, a sense of superiority.

Europe had begun its expansion imperceptibly, within the late Eleventh and early Twelfth centuries this economic development accelerated. As wealth was accumulated, the combination of many circumstances coalesced, people were encouraged to believe the rapid growth might be limitless. As settlements expanded, transport links improved, advances in farming methods, organization of credit and trade. Built upon blossoming self-confidence, in the decline of established empires opportune to allow rapid development. In such activity, a sense of arrogance replaced existing cognitions. This

drive encouraged dominance without discernible limits also broke apart established social and religious assumptions, to which the old rituals had no answers. Population expansion created difficulties in maintaining long established rights and obligations. Development of effective government administration produced distinction between secular and spiritual hierarchies.

Society was also fractured by the increasing chasm between the privileged few, holding extravagant wealth, and extreme poverty experienced by many. Existing suppositions and ideas appeared useless against the increasing injustice towards the many outcasts. Demolition of cherished social theories, highlighted the weakness of church witness whilst focusing on the need for reform and rebuilding.

### *The Faith Challenge*

This world which nurtured, shaped and informed Clare and Francis formed the foundation of their later work, was a contended environment. Francis and Clare sought through taking up the challenge of God to rebuild and transform the church, in the face of laxity in ill-regulated religious life. Through sharing the life basics of food and shelter to meet the immediate needs of people. In living reconciliation, to demonstrate the active love for Christ. Based on prayer, as an answer to the pain of the outcast, through sharing in their reproach; fortified by times of quiet and withdrawal. Enhanced by conversation, preaching and penitence in a search for compatibility with the life of Christ. This resulted in the establishment of Three Orders bound by vow to a life of challenge and support for those in need. Whilst fulfilling the call to deeper commitment to Christ as Master and Lord.

Clare's life goal of poverty in imitation of Francis, had remained her desire from the very beginning of her cloistered life. The adapted rule in which Clare had an input was compiled from the rule composed in 1223 by Francis for the Friars Minor. Clearly, Clare's guidance of the community made it a sanctuary. In the end not only her sister Agnes, but also Clare's mother Ortolana, aunt Bianca and younger sister Beatrix joined the order. Across Europe the life of Clare encouraged the foundation of monasteries for Poor Ladies, seeking restoration of church discipline. We are aware of the encouragement and support Clare gave to Francis in times of doubt and illness. Always loyally holding the ideals of Francis rule and teaching after his death. Inculcated in this daily action of poverty, Clare was fearless in facing invading armies determined on the capture of Assisi.

So ultimately, the local hierarchy ensured that Clare in death, like Francis, was also entombed in ostentation, the opposite of both their life goals.

### *Our Current Society*

Recently published 2012 census statistics show our society is at its most fragmented and divided, beyond anything documented for a considerable time. In this region the census information has highlighted and makes visible, great divergences in people's circumstances. Documenting the effects of extensive and prolonged unemployment, and few job opportunities for the young. Since the demise of the heavy industries established in the first Industrial Revolution. Now many undertake multiple zero hours contracts, with all the associated stress seeking to achieve a living wage. Recognition of these social factors, should bring us to live actively seeking justice. How aware are we of the effect government policies have on those with whom we work, or of the growing chasm between the few who have gained wealth and privilege, and those who are excluded and marginalised.

Where might we turn for advice on social action?

Where can we gain information to assist our perception?

The media daily reminds us that our world is filled with violence, insecurity, injustice and division. Where a few live well on an ocean of prosperity, whilst many are forced to face dangers and exploration. Refugee numbers grow, and in many countries emigration is rising. As those with no prospects seek to migrate to better their economic circumstances.

### *Clare a life of illumination to our own circumstances*

Therefore, in considering formation, because we have few details of Clare's life and undoubted ministry, it is to Clare's testament that I first turned. Clare embraced contemplation to seek God in Christ, as the divine in human attire, illuminating the joy of spiritual vision. Clare understood that Christ is the humility of God, who is hidden in the ordinary. These discoveries were never intended to be an intellectual exercise, but a seeking of depth to penetrate into heart reality. This way of being, is intended to lead to union. Through the journey out of self, in voyaging into another, by the grace of contemplative gazing with open heart. Enlightenment by knowledge through looking into the mirror of the cross, strengthened by love.

Clare sought poverty and humility, heart charity in the suffering heart of Christ. This mystery of God in Christ enabled Clare to enter into a new reality, the dwelling place of God's love. A love whose afflictions revealed by purification and intensity, excited the heart to follow. Such refreshed contemplations, are kindness fulfilled, delight replenished, and a place of refuge, to dwell in the place of God's care. To Clare meditation, bestowed eternal riches on those who loved and embrace Christ. The kingdom of heaven promises offer eternal glory and blessed life to those who desire God. Therefore, to Clare poverty remained an entry into the great mystery of God's love; calling all into the transformation of Christ.

Where does this light lead us today?

### *Lifelong formation lessons*

The current circumstances of our society must lead us to Scripture and The Principles of our Order to seek a way forward.

In developing a framework for formation let us first hold in our minds the Aims set out in the Principles.

- to spread the knowledge and love of Christ,
- to promote the way of love and unity with all creation,
- and to live joyfully a life of simplicity and humble service

These are signposts for our journey into tomorrow, whilst making vital our encounter with creation today.

We should examine two questions to illuminate this dichotomy, which focus on the Aims and their efficacy in formation.

What lessons may we take from the life of Clare, was she so far removed from us in time and orientation?

Are the motivations of their world so very different from the world in which we live?

In contemplating these things, and Scripture - John 15 verse 4 to 10 for illumination of formation through this set Gospel reading for Clare's Feast Day.

John 15:9 shows the word of God being allowed to take root, is liberation. Making us conscious of divine dignity, encompassing love, the reflection of courage, producing a transformation and fragrance which perfumes, this journey toward God through a dynamic relationship of love.

Our individual lives may seem insignificant in the immensity of the universe. Yet each life has a unique part to play in God's creation. In the Spirit, the threads of our lives may be woven into the love, which builds the body of Christ together, for the blessing of our own time and society

*John 15 verse 4 to 10 a signpost to formation*

The images Jesus used when speaking to the crowds drawn to him, of the vine and the very familiar image of viticulture, the seasonal pruning of vines to produce a generosity of fruit. Christ took the familiar seasonal picture of work, turning this vision into a formation signpost in the Christian life. The charge of these verses, is to remain attached to Christ. That the life of God might continually flow through, to greater fruit bearing - borne of love and obedience sought by Clare. These images hold a key to believers who live fully in the world; yet are to hold the unseen mystic interior life of intimacy with God.

The test of successful viticulture is vine productivity. In formation, we are to mirror this abiding; so remain utterly dependant on Christ; tasked with sustaining spiritual life in the world . We should not ignore the image of John 15 verses 4, 5, 6, 7, 9 and 10, whose repetition indicates its centrality. This is only possible, by nurturing intimate attachment to Christ. Drinking the hidden stream, which gives connection to the covenant; being planted and tended by God to produce fruit. Not just an acknowledgement of the person of Jesus, but spiritual connectivity to Christ in our inner lives. This radical truth encapsulates a life lived in the extraordinary. Fruit bearing is not a proof; the branch does not have to demonstrate a level of productivity to be safe from destruction. Separation and the spectre of destruction wrought by the warning of John 15 6 shows the great imperative and value of maintaining connection to the life giving vine.

John 15 verse 7 to 10 underline the truth of Jesus word, this command to obedience demonstrates love for Christ. Producing harmony with Jesus through prayer, increases closeness in keeping Christ's word. There too is an assurance that such prayer produces transformed life. Intended to flow through the limbs of the Body of Christ, to the glory of God, not only in historic generations but these verses also continue to speak volumes to our generation. Will we listen?

### *The interior life*

There is a non negotiability within a future following Jesus, through continued interior spiritual experience, such is the reality in encountering Christ. This may be a foreign and threatening experience, however, John 15 verse 6 shows the heart of eternal security and assurance in Christ's way. To accept the gift of life in the loving triune embrace, which Christ offers, is to find that every end is a new beginning. Grounded and sustained in this love, in the midst of the cross offers the opportunity to enter the depths of life. This opportunity brings together the opposites of poverty / riches; time / eternity; suffering / glory; sadness / rejoicing; death / eternal life; in the midst of human imperfection. Active engagement in contemplation, can never reach the end of the power of God's love, which embraces us, remains truly transformative, empowering us to action. The beauty of Christ encourages us beyond the surface, to dwelling long in the embrace of the triune love.

Radical spirituality is never ambivalent, or weak of heart, but participative in Christ, to face the world, living as if eternity is already fully formed in our lives. This provides insight into the depths of humanity revealing the capacity, incarnation and mystery of the love of God in the cross; made real in day to day interactions. A source of hope through joy, because of the promises to which we are heirs. Thus throwing into sharp relief formation and its life long deepening discovery of eternal love. Christ gives an opportunity of living life separate, but not separated from the world. Life founded on these thoughts and living, cannot be compared with anything to be found in the ideas upon which the society and our world is based today.

The extent of our formation is something we have to establish based in our relationship with Christ. In our formation journey dare we take to heart the words of Clare,

“Place your mind before the mirror of eternity.

Place your soul in the brilliance of glory.

Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance.

And transform your entire being into the image of the Godhead,  
itself through contemplation.” (Clare to Agnes of Prague)

Thereby, to more fully engage with our Our Principles, then in truth meditatively journey on through our own formation with Christ.

Asking always where do we dare go from here?

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