

Clare of Assisi A Beloved Bride of Christ

The story of Clare of Assisi needs to be told from two perspectives. The first tells Clare's story in biographical style; the other explores her spiritual vision. These perspectives overlap with each other.

Part I:

Clare was born in 1194 to the Count of Sasso-Rosso and his wife Ortolana. They lived in a palace in Assisi. Her father intended Clare to marry a prospect beneficial to the family's interests. And, her well-known beauty was an asset in negotiating that marriage. Perhaps influenced by her devout mother, Clare is said have given herself to prayer from the age of twelve.

As with everyone else who lived in the vicinity of Assisi, she would have been aware of the unconventional life of Francis di Pietro di Bernardone. As a dutiful son of a wealthy merchant, in 1202, he joined the military and went off to fight in one of the petty wars that plagued Europe in that era. He was captured and imprisoned for a year. During an illness, he experienced a spiritual crisis that led him to declare he intended to wed "Lady Poverty." Subsequently, he went to Rome, where he lived among the beggars at St. Peter's Basilica. Returning to the country surrounding Assisi, he spent time roaming and praying in remote places. As he was praying in the rural, dilapidated chapel of San Damiano, he experienced a vision in which an icon of the Crucified Christ spoke to him, "Francis, Francis, go and repair My church, which you can see, is falling in ruin." At first, he took his vision literally, and began repairing that chapel and others that had been neglected. Later, he realized that what he heard was a call to reform the Roman church.

His father's determination to bring his son to his senses ended up in his bringing legal accusations against his son before the Bishop of Assisi. Francis responded by renouncing his birthright before his father and the bishop. The bishop, in turn, responded by giving his blessing to Francis, who continued the task of repairing chapels. Discovering a "loafer's" house needing repair, he began nursing the occupant lepers there, a ministry that others were afraid to perform.

In 1208, after hearing a sermon about Jesus sending his disciples out to spread the gospel, he began preaching the message of penitence, brotherly love and peace to the local peasants. He soon attracted a small group of followers, who lived with him in the loafer's house. Sensing the need, he wrote a simple rule consisting of Bible verses for them to live by. Going to Rome, this small followship requested that Pope Innocent II recognize them as a religious order. After some consideration, the pope endorsed the new "Order of Friars Minor," in 1210. Francis was ordained a deacon, giving him spiritual responsibility for the order, and the authority to preach in churches, but not administer mass.

Clare's cousin Rufino joined the new order and on his invitation seventeen-year-old Clare, with her mother and sister, traveled to hear Francis preach at the cathedral of San

Rufino during Lent 1212. His sermon opened a possibility for her life other than an arranged marriage, the prospect of which she dreaded. Through Rufino, she requested a meeting with Francis for guidance. Their secret meeting occurred the following night. This meeting set the tone of their relationship. Did Clare expect more than guidance? After all, he was a public figure revered by many, just 12 years older than she. She was a young and remarkably beautiful girl. Would his vow of celibacy be shaken when he came face to face with her? Both anticipated the danger. She came with her aunt Bianca and he was accompanied by Brother Philip the Tall who was not shy in “telling it as it is.” Francis was direct: he told her to test herself to determine if she was called to a life of poverty by putting on worn peasant clothes, veiling her face, and going incognito begging in Assisi, until she was sure of her calling. The evidence suggests that Clare thereafter saw him as a father figure. The bond between them was in sharing a common calling.

On Palm Sunday, she went to mass with her parents. As palms were distributed at the altar rail, the bishop went to Clara and placed a palm in her hand; a blessing for what he knew she intended. That evening Clare, joined by her cousin Patricia, slipped out of the palace to meet Francis. After taking their vows, Francis cropped their hair, gave them coarse woolen tunics, similar to his own, as their habit. He then took them to live in a nearby Benedictine convent.

Her parents soon discovered where she was at and sent her uncle to bring her home. Attempting to take her forcefully, she seized the chapel’s altar and revealed her shaven head. Realizing he could not violate her sacred vows, he relented. Her sister Catherine then dared to join her at the convent. Soon, Francis moved the growing number of sisters to a newly prepared convent at San Damiano, which became the mother house of the Order of Poor Ladies, a.k.a. “Poor Clares,” where they lived in simple poverty* under the rule Francis gave them. Later, Clare’s sister Beatrix and her widowed mother would join the order.

At first, Francis himself oversaw the order, with Clare serving as its prioress. In 1216, Francis withdrew and Clare became its abbess. Because the sisters lived in a dangerous world, Francis required the sisters to follow their vocation locally, while providing encouragement to the friars as they traveled in their missions. (Francis went as far as Spain and Egypt, where he met the Muslim Sultan on a peacemaking mission. The mission was not successful, but Franciscans were always welcomed in the Sultan’s court.)

Even so, San Damiano would, after Francis’ death, face an attack by the army of Emperor Frederick II who was at war with Pope Gregory IX. As his soldiers moved toward the order’s mother house, Clare faced the army, knelt—her legs previously paralyzed—in silent prayer, while lifting up the sacraments in her hands. Seeing this, the soldiers refused to pillage and destroy the convent.

As the Franciscan movement was expanding, additional houses of Poor Clares began to spring up. In fact, a Franciscan Third Order of Brothers and Sisters of Penitence

was formed by Francis for those, clergy and laity, who needed to live ordinary daily lives but wished to observe the principles of Franciscan life.

The first house of Poor Clares established north of the Alps was formed by Agnes of Prague. She was the daughter of the King of Bohemia. But to escape the political intrigues involved with her marriage, she took a vow of a life of prayer and founded a hospital operated by Franciscan friars. In so doing she heard about Clare and the Order of Poor Ladies. Though Clare and Agnes never met, they corresponded, sharing their spiritual lives with each other. It is from their surviving letters that the depth of Clare's mystical experiences is disclosed.

*Francis was well-aware of the dangers of asceticism. His "poverty" meant being unencumbered by worldly possessions, trusting God for what one might *need*, as Julian Green expressed it, "Francis's beggars humbly asked for something to eat and sang praises to the Lord."

Part II:

"You, O Lord, are blessed for having made me." St. Clare of Assisi spoke these curious final words. After exploring Clare's unusual spiritual vision for many years, these words continued to confound me. The boldness of this medieval saint suggesting that God *blessed himself* by having made her, along with the audacity of actually saying so, seemed both extraordinary and beyond the pale. Add to that the seemingly contradictory fact that St. Clare, in the sequence of her days, suffered one loss upon the next as the terms of her life were turned upside down more than once. Yet, at the end of it all, she proclaimed that God had blessed himself by her existence, strained and sorrowful as it was.

Clare's flight from her family home was a high-spirited gesture, and she embraced it devotedly. By worldly standards, she made an unreasonable choice to give up power and station to land instead in living as Jesus did.

Her intentions were wild and brave, and she pictured herself active in ministering to neighbors, serving lepers, tending her garden, offering prayers for the sick. She was free—unconstrained by social obligations and detached from political schemes. Granted she was poor, but that only brought her into closer intimacy with the Lord, whose example she longed to emulate.

Yet life's brutal realities upended her dreams of high-spirited action. By the time Clare was 32, Francis had died a lingering and tortured death due to multiple illnesses, while she herself had contracted a malady that left her unable to walk. From that time until her death she was confined to her bed and animated her duties from within the walls of her small dormitory. Even so, she changed the landscape of her world and forged an alternative picture of female empowerment that, in an upside down way rendered a kind of power sufficient to shut the mouths of popes and turned advancing armies on their heels.

From where did such power arise? More to the point, what was the nature of such power given Clare's limited circumstances? The answer comes through a series of letters Clare wrote to Agnes of Prague, a young woman of royal descent who similarly gave up a

life of privilege to live out Franciscan poverty. From these letters, themes emerge that defined Clare's spiritual vision and kept her hopeful and empowered even as her own life took unexpected turns.

Clare affirms Agnes' vow of poverty, her choice to leave behind a world of defined roles and political wrangling in exchange for freedom, and more importantly, utter dependence upon the faithfulness of God to provide for every need. She salutes Agnes' choice to give up her royal crown in exchange of such a life, leaving the would-be queen free to live boldly and fearlessly, which, Clare asserts, is where true power lies. "One clothed cannot fight another naked, because she who has something to be caught hold of is more quickly thrown to the ground." Clare calls this life the "glorious exchange," swapping worldly station for the fleetness and liberation of a higher allegiance.

Beyond this, Clare exhorts Agnes to remember her calling—Franciscan poverty—and not to waver from it. She is to live her life of service and execute its activity, constantly, unswervingly, and with a light step. Her choice of metaphor is ironic, given Clare's own physical constraints. But what she means here is that all of Agnes' undertakings as she establishes a mission for Franciscan women in Prague, she is to assert her program with gentility, humility, and deference, even if she combats forces—in this case, the pope himself—trying to pull her off course. Clare exhorts Agnes to remain hopeful and dismiss anything that would distract her. "May you go forward securely, joyfully, and swiftly, on the path of prudent* happiness, believing nothing, agreeing with nothing, that would dissuade you from this commitment or would place a stumbling block on your way."

Perhaps the most telling glimpse of the spiritual vision that informed Clare's last words comes in the third letter to Agnes. She writes, "Place your mind before the mirror of eternity!" Clare exhorts Agnes to picture her life (as she herself did) as if through a mirror in which the image looking back does not resemble one gazing into it. Clare's earthly visage was drawn and pale, but in the mirror, she beheld a face of glory and beauty as an adored and beloved bride of Christ himself. The exercise held transformative power for both Agnes and Clare (and countless other female penitents). As Clare reminds Agnes, "the King himself will take you into the heavenly bridal chamber."

Clare's spiritual vision culminated in its grand and final assertion, uttered on her deathbed on August 11, 1253. She first whispered to herself, "Go securely and in peace my blessed soul." Then she concluded, "And you, Lord, are blessed because you have created me."

Not many of us reach the place in our spiritual journeys where our testimony is about the singular glory that God imparted to himself by creating us. Not many understand that our true mission is to give back this unique glory and to bless him by it.

I have heard testimonies of divine actions moving earthward from heaven. Clare's spiritual vision, at its pinnacle, went in the opposite direction. Her testimony arose from earth to reach heaven until she saw herself as she was meant to be seen, taking her singular place in God's saving activity. "Glorify yourself" is the prayer Jesus prays on the

last night of his life. Imagine a human being so emptied of self-consciousness and filled with beatitude that one's prayer is to see one's life as God sees it. Then imagine giving thanks for the gift of rendering back to God the life that blesses him.

Clare, of all possible messengers, carried it to perfection. She embodied Christian truth—not dogmatic truth but mystical truth, poetical truth—as one who inch by inch was stripped of self-importance and earthly contrivances until there was nothing left except the skin and bones of her life lived out on an uncomfortable bed. That was it. That was the place of perfection, where God's light found its fullest effulgence.

It could be said that Clare's life—with its twists, losses, and struggles—was the planted seed that, with the movement of time and workings of Spirit, became what was its destiny, a flower in blossom. And at the end of her life's journey, God crowned her days with a picture of who he made her to be, a perfect flower.

Lutherans commemorate the life of Clare of Assisi on August 11 and the life of Francis of Assisi on October 3. Agnes of Prague (a.k.a. "Agnes of Bohemia") was canonized by the Roman Church in 1989.

*i.e., farsighted.

Sources: Julien Green, *The Life and Times of Francis of Assisi*, Harper and Row, 1987 (Part I); Wendy Murray, "An empty and full life," *Christian Century*, July 28, 2021 (Part II).