

Clare's Conformity to Christ in the *Libro* of Mariano of Florence.

The following of Christ is the primary theme of Clare's writings. And yet upon examining all that had been written about her after her death, it would seem that she has been superbly eulogized as everything but this image of Christ she strove to be.

In a recent work by Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, there is a similar observation in regard to medieval mystics in general. Prof. Bynum found that although the writings of feminine saints and mystics in the Middle Ages prove that during their lifetime the women themselves aspired to transformation into Christ, it remained the accepted norm that their biographers cite these holy women as images of Mary rather than of Christ.

Clare certainly encouraged her sisters to imitate Mary and stay close to her, especially in her contemplation of her son, Jesus. Still, it was the following of Christ that was always the end to be achieved. She would tell them:

"Study yourself before the face of Christ (4th Let 15). Behold Him, consider Him, contemplate Him, and desire to be like Him" (2nd. Let 20). "Live in His powerlessness and humility" (Rule 8:3). "Become reflections of Jesus Christ" (Test 19). "Place your mind in God's presence, bathe your spirit in His light, learn to love Him as he presented himself to us in his manhood, and you will gradually become like Him in his Godhead (3rd Let 12-13).

In the year 1515 a Friar Minor, Brother Mariano of Florence wrote of Clare as an image of Jesus Christ. His book is entitled: *Libro delle dignita et excellentie del ordine della seraphica madre delle povere donne Sancta Chiara da Asisi*. The Book of the dignity and excellence of the order of the seraphic mother of the poor ladies Saint Clare of Assisi. In this ancient account of the Order of Saint Clare there is a chapter entitled: "Come sancta

Chiara è stata in molti acti et gesti a Christo conforme." How Saint Clare was conformed to Christ in many ways and deeds.

Bartholomew of Pisa's work on Francis of Assisi's conformity to Christ is well known among Franciscan scholars. Perhaps Mariano's work has been overlooked these past 500 years. In it he presents a lovely panegyric expounding fifteen ways in which Clare was conformed to Christ. Since, to date, there seems to be no translation of this text, I offer this limited, effort at an English rendering of the section on Clare's conformity to Christ. Mariano's lengthy quotations from the sources are omitted here and the references listed in brackets.

Tract II, Parts 1 and 2: "The holy sisters."

The blessed Christ desiring to save the world from its oblivious, distracted, and dissolute ways gave his standard to the seraphic Francis who perfectly and with great fervor renewed in the minds of men the memory of the life of Christ the mediator. Very great and numerous are the people who have followed him. Some books demonstrate 30 conformities which have been written to the praise of the great father.

Just as Christ wished this renewal of his life among men, so in the same manner he wished to mandate a woman having the same seraphic ardor who would renew his life within the feminine gender; one who had the same likeness and conformity to Himself as Francis. And this was the glorious St. Clare, the first plant of the Order, as will be clearly shown.

First. St. Clare was like Christ in his annunciation. Just as it was announced to His glorious mother that she would give birth to Jesus the Savior of the world

who would be a holy light and His name would be Jesus, so Saint Clare was announced to her mother while she was in the Church before the crucifix. By a clear voice the mother of St. Clare was commanded that when she was born she was to be baptized with the name of Clare. Here then is the first conformity, in the Annunciation, in the way Clare was named as the voice decreed.

Secondly. Clare with Christ was in purity or true spotlessness. Of Christ the psalmist says: He was the most beautiful of the sons of men. (Ps. 44) And in another place it says: He was the brightness of eternal light, and the mirror without spot. (Wis, 7:26) And also in the Canticle it says of the spouse: My beloved is white and ruddy. (Cant. 5:10) By "brightness" is meant purity and spotlessness, and by "ruddy" is meant the love which is a haven for all human creatures. As a virgin, Clare had this purity and spotlessness. Holding carnal pleasures in disdain, she proposed not to know man in marriage and desired rather to make vows of perpetual chastity. (Bull Can. 6, 8; Leg. 6)

The third conformity of St. Clare with Christ is in poverty. Christ was born a poor little one. The Virgin Mary had no baby clothes, nor crib of silver or gold, but she laid the child in a manger between an ass and an ox in a crude lodging for servants. During his life He was totally poor, as St. Bernard said: When the Virgin Mary lost Him for three days He went from door to door asking for bread. [Source unknown] And St. Luke said that on the Sabbath He went to the home of a chief Pharisee for bread. (Lk 14) In death He was poor and stripped of His garments, as St. John said (Jn 19:23-24), and He was buried in someone else's tomb. This sufficiently shows that He was poor and that He loved poverty and taught poverty.

In the same way, the glorious mother Clare, in her third birth, was reborn at St. Mary of the Angels when her hair was completely cut off by St. Francis, and she was wrapped in a crude tunic and placed in the crib of poverty in religion. She made a vow of poverty and taught poverty, and left poverty as her testament to her sisters. She also, in death, was placed in another's tomb. She loved poverty so much that in the beginning of her conversion she gave away all her inheritance and kept nothing, distributing all to the poor. (Bull Can. 5; Leg. 13)

Saint Clare contracted a great love and friendship with poverty because nothing else in this world was as sweet as poverty to her beloved Jesus. Many times she admonished her daughters saying that nothing they could do would be as great before God as voluntary poverty; and that community founded upon poverty would be set upon a firm foundation; and that a religious convent would be pleasing to God when it was rich in poverty and want; and that fortified with most high poverty it would endure forever. And so, St. Clare, through the love of Christ's holy poverty, became conformed to him. (Bull Can. 17; Rule 8:1; Test. 40-41)

The fourth conformity which Clare had with her beloved spouse Jesus Christ was in her subjection. As St. Paul said to the Philippians, Christ definitely made Himself obedient, even to death on a cross. (Phil 2:8) And St. Luke said He was subject to his mother and His foster father St. Joseph. (Luke 2:51) So too, St. Clare, out of love for the same Christ, her spouse, placed herself under the smooth yoke of holy obedience as she clearly stated in the first chapter of her Rule. (Rule 1:3; Test. 24-26)

Furthermore, she persevered in this holy obedience until her death. And she

made the promise never to be released from it or to deviate from it. In her humility she reputed herself as vile and unworthy of every honor and desired rather to obey than to command. She wished to be a servant, and for this reason she resisted the office St. Francis imposed upon her although with deep humility she finally consented to accept the office of Abbess. (See Leg. 12, Bull Can 8)

The fifth conformity of St. Clare with Christ was in the increase of many disciples as had happened with the followers of Christ who ran to follow after His footprints. (Matt.4:25, 5:1) So, in the same manner, Clare gathered 40 sisters in the monastery of San Damiano. But even beyond Assisi, numerous monasteries were founded in many parts of the world, as for example, in Italy, Spain, France, Germany, Bohemia, Hungary and Greece. Ladies came in order to follow Christ in the observance of the Gospel life according to the example she gave in the way she followed Christ her heavenly spouse. (See Bull Can. 9; Leg. 10)

The sixth conformity of Saint Clare with Christ was in her bodily mortification, which extended to her footwear, her clothing, food and sleep. (Matt 8, 20) This is also shown by the holy evangelists concerning Christ and His pilgrimage in this valley of sorrows. He did not use shoes in order to be an example of mortification of the body. In her imitation of the gospels the virgin Clare was always without sandals, or anything to protect her feet, walking with bare feet, as it is shown in the second chapter of her Rule.

Also, Christ wore a long garment in the form of a cross such as a vesture with a simple mantle, which according to Saint John Chrysostom (*Ep. ad Romanos homilia 24, 4*) was made from cloth with brown threads and reinforced as was the clothing of the poor in Palestine. Also, according to Nicholas of Lisa and other

devout men, it is believed and held that He wore a belt of rope. This shape and manner of dress was chosen by Saint Francis, by divine inspiration, and given to Saint Clare who had also come to relive the life of Christ. This was the form worn by Saint Clare and it was used in many monasteries of those who lived under the first and second Rules. But those who lived under Pope Urban's Rule wore a vest or scapular with a mantle joined at the neck. Yet this garment, too, was supposed to be cheap in value and color, in the way Clare was always clothed. (Bull Can. 11; Rule 2:24).

Also, Christ chose to sleep on wood, and in birth He rested in a crib upon straw. While living in the desert He slept on the ground, in the boat He slept on a plank, in death He was upon the wood of the cross. (Lk 2:7) In the same way, the virgin Clare had only the bare ground and sometimes twigs as her bed, and hard wood as a pillow for her head. (Bull Can. 11) Also it is said in the Legend that "after a long illness began to take hold of her weakened body, and the blessed Francis commanded it, she used a sack filled with straw." (Leg. 17).

Christ also practiced austerity in food. He fasted forty days and forty nights. (Matt 4:2) One does not read that He ate meat or the paschal lamb, but rather fish, and sometimes fruit. Although He was invited to dine many times and ate what was placed before Him, as He taught His apostles, nevertheless, it is given to believe that He ate delicate foods moderately.

Clare was conformed in her austerity to this, prescribing perpetual fast except on the Nativity of the Lord. (Bull Can. 11) Her food on three days was bread and water (Leg 18), and because of such frequent rigorous penance she developed infirmities. The Bishop of Assisi and Saint Francis commanded that she not let

pass a day without taking a half an ounce of bread. Bull Can. 12) This is sufficient to show how Saint Clare was conformed to Christ in her mortification of the body.

The seventh way in which Saint Clare was conformed to Christ, was in the way she accomplished her work. As Christ mandated His disciples and sent them two by two into every country, (Matt 10:1, 8) in the same way, Clare sent her sisters to every part of Lombardy and Tuscany to establish new monasteries. Agnes was sent to Florence. Pacifica was sent as Abbess to Spello, where, there being no water for her sisters, through her prayers to God, she caused a fountain to appear which still endures. Balbina, niece of Saint Clare was sent to Arezzo, and another Balbina also went to Spello, and others to various monasteries, like Padua and Mantua.

The eighth manner in which Saint Clare was conformed to Christ, was in the confirmation of her life by miracles. Certainly, Christ's evangelical teachings were confirmed by many miracles, for it is said in the first chapter of Mark, that He amazed all by His doctrine, and most of all by His power to perform miracles. (Mark 1:27) So, too, Saint Clare was confirmed, along with her sisters, by many miracles.

The ninth way was Saint Clare's likeness to Christ in the gift of multiplication, like Christ Who in the desert multiplied five loaves in such a way that there was enough to satisfy five thousand men. (Matt 14:15-21) In this also, He wished to make His beloved spouse Clare like Himself. One day when only a half a loaf of bread was available for feeding the sisters in that monastery, she directed that half be distributed in pieces among the sisters. It multiplied in the hands of the

one who broke it so that there were fifty ample portions for the sisters. (Bull Can. 16)

The tenth way Clare was like Christ was in the manner in which she formed her sisters. Just as Christ taught His disciples to flee idle and harmful words, saying "For every idle word men utter they shall answer on the Day of Judgment," (Matt 12:36) in the same way Clare taught her sisters to shun idle words. Just as silence was prescribed from the beginning up to modern times, it continues to be observed in the same way. (Rule 5, 7:1-2) In this and every other virtue she formed them with gentle words. (Bull Can. 10, 11, 12) With sweetness and gentle exhortations, she encouraged her sisters toward every perfection. (Test 56-60; 61-66; 67-70; 71-73; 74-76)

Eleventh. Saint Clare was conformed to Christ in her imitation of His entire life. Dauntlessly, she followed and held on to the life of Christ and observed to the letter the holy Gospel according to the Rule she received from Francis, in which it is written in the beginning: The form of life of the Order of the Poor Sisters that blessed Francis established is this: to observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, by living in obedience, without anything of one's own, and in chastity. (Rule I: 1; 6,3) And in the end of the Rule it says: that...we may always observe the poverty and humility of our Lord Jesus Christ and of His most holy Mother, and the holy Gospel we have firmly promised. (Rule 12:13)

Twelfth. Saint Clare conformed herself to Christ through her great weariness and infirmity. The holy evangelist testified that Jesus was often weary in the thirty-three years He stayed in this world, and He had to carry much infirmity in His body. Saint John said that Jesus was tired and rested at the fountain. (Matt.

8:17; Jn 4: 6). And the prophet said of His infirmity: from the sole of his foot to the head there is not a sound spot. (Is 1: 6). Christ Himself cried out: "O you who pass by the way see if there be any sorrow like My sorrow". (Lament I: 12) In the same way Clare was worn out by excessive austerities and the denial of every earthly thing. This deprivation and weakening of the flesh and bodily strength was ordained by divine inspiration, so that she who had been enriched with the merits of good deeds when in good health might, in infirmity, be further enriched through the agony and passion of the body. (Leg 39)

But in all her twenty-eight years of continual sickness she continued firm in virtue, especially in patience, for there never came from her lips any word of murmuring or complaint. From her lips came only words of holiness, humility and gratitude to God, always praising and blessing His holy Name. (See Leg. 44)

Thirteenth. Clare was conformed to Christ in crucifixion. Although the holy Clare was not corporally placed upon the cross, spiritually she was always one with Christ nailed to the cross, in such a way that she could say with Saint Paul: I am crucified with Christ. (Gal. 2:19b) Through love she carried the cross, as was seen throughout the examination process when she was to be canonized. She focused upon the love of God and neighbor and voluntarily gave up every material thing.

Before she became ill, having heard of the five brothers who were martyred in Morrocco, she wished to go and receive martyrdom, too. But because she was a woman, it was forbidden her. Yet, although she could not have what she desired from the hands of the crucifiers, she still desired the same kind of crucifixion. (Leg. 30-32)

Fourteenth. Saint Clare was spiritually conformed to Christ in death. Christ sincerely wanted to die on the tree of the cross out of love for us. In the same way, that friend of the cross, Saint Clare, for love of her beloved crucified spouse, desired to die on her cross; a cross that was not material but spiritual.

The material cross has depth, height, length and width. In this same way, the spiritual cross upon which saint Clare wished to die had four dimensions: first, the depth of humility which is the fundamental principle of the cross. Just as water always runs through a valley, so, the divine water cannot operate unless one descends into humility. Because Clare was filled with this virtue, God was able to fill her with such a great abundance of grace that she persevered for forty-two years in penance.

This spiritual cross upon which Clare died had the height of poverty. This poverty is termed "high" because it raises one from the earth and draws them to Christ who was most poor on earth and who died naked on the cross. The spiritual cross has the width of charity, which consists in the love of God and neighbor. There is no need to say more of this because we have already demonstrated Clare's love in all we have written here. The spiritual cross must have the length of perseverance which crowns only the one who endures. Saint Clare truly was consummated and returned her soul to her beloved spouse because in her intense fervor she persevered to the end.

These four virtues, humility, poverty, charity and perseverance comprised and made up her spiritual cross, because truly, for our senses and our frail humanity these are always crucifying. But Saint Clare always rose above the hardship

involved so she could rest on the bed of the cross and die with her beloved spouse Jesus Christ.

Fifteenth and last. Saint Clare was conformed to Christ in the tomb. For just as Christ was taken down from the cross and placed in a stranger's tomb, so when Clare was liberated from the present life her crucified body was placed in a tomb in the Church of San Giorgio, prepared for the use of seculars. (Leg. 48)

This ancient account of Clare's equality to Francis in her conformity to Christ, is early evidence of the recognition of Clare as Co-Founder of the Franciscan Order.

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