

## **Clare's Palm Sunday Consecration: The Following of Christ**

Palm Sunday has an element of jubilation. It commemorates Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem. But at the same time the focus of the day is austere, for the liturgy of the Word proclaims His passion. It marks the beginning of a week focused upon Christ and His great act of love. This is His "hour."

Yet, here we are directing our attention to Clare, on a day when Christ should be uppermost in our minds. But Clare will only point us more directly to Christ. Our concentration upon a certain Palm Sunday in her life may recall us to our own innate capacity for God, and to the truth that it is through Jesus Christ that we are guided most perfectly to the true fulfillment for which our humanity longs.

In this Franciscan woman we have a competent teacher of holiness who had to grow in the knowledge and experience of God by the demanding paths of faith, trust and love we all must walk. To place herself daily in the peace of God's presence and the promise of His strength amid the hardships and insecurity of the 13th century required the same kind of effort we all have to make in this century, too. The witness of her fidelity may serve to convince us that the grace of God that brought her life to such a happy conclusion is just as surely acting in our lives.

Inspired by the example of St. Clare we may enter into this sacred time with our attention more centered, and our spirits more ready to receive its energies. May our reflections today on Clare and her Christ leave us with new insights and a real determination to live through, with, and in the crucified Lord Who was her life, her meaning and her message.

**Palm Sunday**

On the day before the "Feast of Palms," Clare informed Francis of her readiness to complete her conversion to God. After two years of pondering and preparation she was no longer content to remain in the comfortable home of her prosperous family. Clare had come to the moment when she felt driven to leave all the enviable possibilities her state of life offered so that she might live the Gospel more fully. Francis instructed her to attend the Sunday liturgy and take part in the reception of palms with the others. They would wait for her that night. (Leg 7)

The story of Clare's following of Christ and her ultimate transformation into Him began on that Palm Sunday in the year 1212. On that morning Clare Favarone clothed herself as for her wedding day. She entered the Cathedral along with the other women "thoroughly radiant with festive splendor," Celano tells us, (Leg 7) dressed in her most beautiful gown and adorned with dazzling jewels.

When the Bishop began distribution of the blessed branches the young ladies of the upper classes gracefully sauntered up the aisle in all their finery. The reception of palms had become an opportunity for the eligible women of the town to display their assets. It was a social custom Clare did not take part in this time. She was no longer available; she remained in her place. Bishop Guido walked toward Clare and handed her a palm branch. It was an act that seemed to represent the covenant God was making with her through His Church. The palm was equally symbolic of the living martyrdom she was embracing in a life of solitude. (There are early paintings of Clare holding the martyrs palm.)

Clare's leave-taking from her family had to be carried out secretly. This was no easy thing to accomplish. She couldn't just walk out the front door of her fortress-like home. If the guards stopped her she would not likely have a second chance. Furthermore, once

she took this step she would have no position in society. She would be leaving her rightful position in a court of noble ladies to become one of the uncounted, the property-less women of the peasant class. She would be giving up the respectable life she had known for a harsh and obscure existence.

When darkness fell she managed to find a way out by an unused back door known as the "door of the dead." It was as if both death and resurrection were accomplished in Clare's passage through this door as she walked through the darkness of fear and uncertainty, to a new life bright with the life-giving spirit of Christ. A "new" life it surely would be. Just as Jesus passed through the glory of his triumphal entry into Jerusalem to embrace a week of suffering and death, so, Clare, still knowing the taste of life's finer things, passed through this door, on the Feast of Palms, to be plunged into the brutal week that faced her. Celano fittingly records in retrospect: [she] left worldly joys to enter into the passion of Christ. (Leg. 7)

Clare and her chaperon made the long and arduous walk through the woods and meadows of the Umbrian Valley. They arrived at the chapel of St. Mary of the Angels toward midnight where the friars were waiting with lighted candles to receive her into their brotherhood. Her costly clothing was replaced with a rough tunic held in place by a rope around her waist; her beautiful blonde hair was shorn and her head covered with a black veil. Then Francis brought her to the Benedictine Nuns. Because of her lack of a dowry she was received to do menial work around the monastery. (Bartoli 49)

The noble household of Favarone would not take this embarrassment easily. Nor could they be expected to endure passively the loss of so valuable a daughter. Women were used as property to increase family holdings by an advantageous marriage into other powerful clans. To lose her was to lose a small fortune - or maybe, not so small a

fortune at that.

Clare was very beautiful and had been asked for many times. A fine nobleman by the name of Lord Ranieri di Bernardo testified at the canonization hearing that each time he proposed to her she ended up preaching to him about leaving everything the world could offer in order to serve God. He added that many others had also begged her to take them for her husband.

Clare's extended family lost no time. The very next day her uncle Monaldo stormed the Monastery of San Paolo with a small army of the family knights demanding Clare's return. They condemned what she had done as unworthy of her class and unprecedented in her family. She had broken their hearts. These strong men rebuked and insulted her and did not spare even "violent [physical] force," (Leg. 9) determined to take her back even if they had to drag her away.

But Clare was just as determined as they were, and made it quite clear "she would in no way be torn from the service of Christ." (Leg. 9) She clung to the altar and removed her veil to reveal her tonsured head, the sign of a person under the protection of the Church. The men turned back without her only because they feared they would incur the social stigma of excommunication if they continued in their attempt. Eventually, Clare was settled in the Monastery of San Damiano Francis prepared for her. She followed Christ within this little walled convent for the rest of her life.

### **Clare's Following of Christ.**

"The Solemnity of the Day of the Palms," (Leg. 17) (Weiser 91-92) as it was observed in the 13th. century, was the celebration of a Christian's deeper entrance into the Paschal Mystery. According to the tradition of that time, an elaborate ceremony took place on

this day. The main feature and focal point of the liturgy was a procession through the city led by Jesus in His Eucharistic presence, or by an image of the Crucified King of Glory. But even more significantly, this day was known as the "Feast of the Following of Christ." (Weiser 91-92) It was a joyful celebration liturgically embodying Clare's deepest aspirations. Now we can begin to understand the reason behind her choice of this particular day for her consecration to God.

In Our Holy Father's recent encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor* (The Splendor of Truth), the following of Christ is defined as a "holding fast to the very person of Jesus...." (#20) To follow Jesus Christ means to become like Him by taking on His attitudes towards life, and with them a new way of being, both within ourselves and in our interactions with people, events and things. In her book entitled *Radical Optimism*, Beatrice Bruteau summons us to that taking on of Christ's mind, explaining how He taught us this new way.

He tried to draw us into His own consciousness through the stories He told, so that we could learn to think and feel and will and see the world as he does, and act in it as he does. (Bruteau 133) ... We are the body of Jesus in our world, in our time, in our particular locality and historical circumstances. We are the Word of God made flesh.... The Kingdom doesn't just float down from heaven. It is constructed by us out of our faith. It is always at hand, always ready and available. Anytime we want we can bring the kingdom of God into full concrete reality. (Bruteau 132 & 135)

Evelyn Underhill also wrote about this tremendous aspect of our humanity. She pointed out precisely what it is that hinders its actualization.

(The Kingdom) is here, to be had, but our field of consciousness has been monopolized for years by a certain physical order, and it has set up habits of response to life's claims, so that we allow the physical world to overwhelm us while our spiritual capacities lie dormant. (Underhill 162)

Clare was a woman who turned to the Gospel, listened intently to Christ's words, found His promise true, and became formed into Him. The spiritual direction contained in her letters reveals her priority of living each day with Christ. In these letters we find phrases like:

Love him totally Who gave Himself out of love for you. (3rd let 15). Cling to him with all your heart (4th let 9). Love...Jesus...from the depth of your heart, and never let the thought of him leave your mind (Let Erm 11). Rejoice with him (3rd let 9). Suffer with him, weep with him, die with him (2nd let 21). Holding him in our thoughts gives light to all our ways ... He is the treasure buried in the field of this world (3rd. It.vs.7) Carry him spiritually within yourself (3rd let 24). Just as God descended into the womb of the Virgin Mary, this same God whom the heavens cannot contain, you can also bear within yourself. Contemplate his incomprehensible delights, and unending spiritual riches.... (4th let 27). Be faithful to him until death (Let Erm 4).

### **The Mystical Dimension of Clare's following of Christ**

Clare's spirituality was centered in Christ, though, as a Christian mystic, she experienced God's presence in three ways. For example, in her Testament she alluded to God in a cosmic sense, as the "Father of mercies," (Test 1) - the Ultimate Reality in which we are contained like tiny drops of water in a vast ocean. Then, in the proceedings of the Canonization Process her sisters mentioned her consciousness of the Divine Presence in every created person and thing. (Can Pro 14:9) But Clare knew God most perfectly through the strength of her relationship with Jesus Christ.

Underhill wrote that: In the experience of Divine Reality the greatest spiritual minds have always discerned an overwhelming certitude of a personal contact, a love answering to love. (Underhill 162) It was this kind of association with Christ that led Clare, too, deeper into the experience of the Trinity.

One of the means she used to make Jesus a reality in her life was to consciously direct all her natural faculties, both intellectual and sensual, all her healthy feminine emotions as a woman, toward the God-Man, as to a spouse lovingly present to her. By employing the imagination and feelings in this manner the whole person is involved so that it learns to interact in the realm of the spirit in an authentically human way.

In Clare's letters to Agnes of Prague, a princess who forfeited a royal marriage with Frederick II to join the Poor Ladies, Clare congratulated her that she had done much better in choosing the Lord. Out of her personal experience, Clare introduced Agnes to her Bridegroom as to:

a spouse surpassing all others in his greatness and dignity (1st.let, vs. 8 & 10);  
a spouse more noble [than any other] (1st. let, vs. 7); a spouse so beautiful that all the heavenly spirits never stop admiring him (4th. let. vs. 10); a spouse who is all goodness and gentleness (4th. let, vs. 12)...Who is kindness itself, ever ready to fill our deepest desires. His very being contains a joy ready to overflow into ours. His presence can give new life to anyone no matter how spiritually dead they may feel themselves to be (4th. let vs. 11-13)...Who refreshes us whenever we turn our hearts to him (4th. let 12)...Whose love is so real it can be felt (4th. let 11).

### **Jesus As God in Clare's Following of Christ**

Besides using concepts of human love, Clare's bond with Christ included in one and the same movement the awe due the fullness of the Godhead. Her expressions of familiarity never lacked the theological balance typical of thirteenth century spirituality. She adored the human Jesus equally as:

The Son of God Most High, the Splendor of Eternal Glory. (3<sup>rd</sup> let vs. 12; 4<sup>th</sup> let vs. 14)

The King of Kings, the Lord of Lords ... (2nd let vs. 1) our Creator, our Redeemer, (yet also), our Consoler (Erm. 16), and our Brother.

(Who) reigns eternally in heaven and on earth. (1st. let vs. 17)

(Who) is Eternal King (4th. let. vs. 1); The King of Angels (4th.let. vs. 21); The Son of the Most High Father and the glorious Virgin Mary (1st. let vs. 25 & 3rd. let vs. 17).

(Whose) throne is the throne of God. (4th. let vs. 3)

(Who) made all things under heaven. (3rd. let vs. 7)

(Who) spoke and all was created. (1st. let vs. 17)

He is the incarnation of the Divine essence. (3rd. let vs. 13)

He is the Lamb without spot who took away the sins of the world. (4th. let vs. 8).

(He) is brightness without end ... (4th. let vs. 14).

### **Clare's Following of the Poor and Suffering Christ**

Clare seemed especially overwhelmed by the love of this God Who chose poverty and suffering for our sake. She didn't merely listen to the passion as it was read on that Palm Sunday. It seems rather that she consciously chose on that day to commit herself to the cross together with Christ. (McNally 328) She communicated this choice by the form her contemplation of Christ assumed. From that day on her prayer-life centered upon Him who had lived on earth as a poor, rejected, and crucified man. She wrote:

Contemplate Christ, more beautiful than the sons of men, (who) became for your salvation the lowest of men, despised, struck, scourged untold times throughout his body, and then [He] died amid the sufferings of the cross.... (2nd. let 20) meditate constantly on the mysteries of the cross (Let Erm 12). Look upon the poor and suffering Christ and embrace him (2nd. let vs. 18). Love Christ, [who was] poor and crucified" (1st. let vs. 13). Let us not fear to be contemptible, for Christ did not hesitate to become contemptible for our sake. (2nd let vs. 19)

Historians conjecture any number of reasons why Clare would have tended to

concentrate upon the suffering Christ. Franciscan *Fioretti* stories make the early days of the Order seem romantic and uncomplicated. But, on the contrary, those were violent times: blood often flowed through the streets of Assisi. Besides the terror of being caught in the middle of ongoing feuds between the towns, Clare mentions in her Testament the sisters' personal troubles as being every manner of deprivation, poverty, hard work, endless trials, shame, and the contempt they had to endure simply because they were a group of women claiming they could survive by trusting in Divine Providence and the work of their own hands.

But Clare went on to say "they found great joy in these trials." (Test 28) This response is important because it meant her concentration upon a suffering Christ was neither sentimental nor masochistic but solidly rooted in the Paschal Mystery. Clare contemplated those wounds in the risen Lord to discover what we all need to learn; that our wounds will become our glory; that our bloody sweat, our crosses, and our crucifixions can become occasions of inner development and spiritual resurrection.

When Clare alluded to the pain or emptiness that makes possible our grasp of the treasure hidden at the core of our being, she described it as the "strong arms of poverty" (3rd. let. 7). It might be the poverty of deep loss that carves out inside us a certain emptiness; that forces us to experience a deeper level of ourselves, where God is. After Clare died her sisters recalled this enduring lesson of hers: "True patience in enduring such circumstances ... will bring you to God" (*Notification*).

But it takes time to grasp this marvelous truth that lies hidden within us throughout our lives. When incomprehensible events took from me all I had valued most it took years to really let it all go. But once I had, I gradually found myself drawn by God to return to a skill in research and writing I thought I could ever use in the cloister. And now I

never cease being filled with great awe that what I at first grieved over as a great loss has made possible the something that is life-giving for myself and others.

Of course, our culture doesn't believe in this kind of attitude towards misfortune; it expects that life go according to plans, or at least in a way that's just and fair. But God knows we're more than the narrow entity we imagine ourselves to be; we're capable of strengths and possibilities and spiritual capacities we'll never know unless we accept the challenges that stretch us. Clare had to have experienced this pain often to have achieved the stature she did. In his book entitled, *True Resurrection*, H.A. Williams wrote:

If we can choose what has been chosen for us, and work with whatever we are left with, our sufferings can be transformed into something that creates us. (Williams 158) When I read this everything in me said: "yes!"

### **The Spirit of Christ in St. Clare**

This awareness of the transcendent dimension of all of life, especially its crosses, comes to us gradually as the attitudes of Christ become stronger in us. We become more truly human, more capable of living the highest human values. We become, like Jesus, the way, the truth and the life for our world. Clare described this indwelling Spirit in herself as:

A power so great it can give new life to lifeless spirits... (4th. let vs. 13). So powerful it had held back the powers of darkness she had felt within herself...(4th. let vs. 13).

A power that does not dominate but gives new life....a life in which we become like God (3rd. let vs. 13). A power surpassing the power anyone else could have over her... (1st. let vs. 9).

This indwelling Spirit so enlightened and informed Clare that she became a powerful force for good known around the world though she lived enclosed in a convent. Our

world needs desperately to be touched by this spirit and it needs us to bring it this kind of salvation. But, as Evelyn Underhill wrote: At present, we tend to starve our possible centers of regeneration, or let them starve themselves by our encouragement of incessant activity at the expense of a more contemplative mode of existence. Until this is remedied, [she adds] we shall get nothing really [done in this world]. (Underhill 218).

### **Clare's Conformity to Christ.**

The most prominent theme in Clare's writings may be the concept of following Christ and becoming like Him. And yet, when I examined all that was written about her after she died, I found that she was praised for being everything but the image of Christ she strove to be. She was eulogized as:

A brilliant light (Bull 2), a lofty candelabra of sanctity, a new fountain, an eminent and most celebrated tree (Bull 9), leader of the humble, teacher of the chaste, abbess of penitents, vessel of humility, fortress of chastity, fire of charity (Bull 10), lover of poverty (Bull 13), venerable virgin (Bull 18), a new leader of women (Leg. Preface).

There is a study by Caroline Walker Bynum, in her book *Fragmentation and Redemption*, to shed an educated light on this situation. Professor Bynum found that although the writings of the feminine saints and mystics of the Middle Ages prove that during their lifetime the women themselves aspired to become Christ, it remained the accepted custom of the biographers to cite holy women as images of Mary rather than of Christ. Thus, we find in *The Legend of Saint Clare* attributed to Thomas of Celano:

Therefore, let the men follow the new male disciples of the Incarnate Word [and] the women imitate Clare, the footprint of the Mother of God... (Leg. Preface)

While Clare indeed encouraged her sisters to stay close to the Mother of God, the most perfect image of her son, the prevailing principle was that they contemplate Christ, as Mary did, and try to be like him. 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 vs. 20). Live in his powerlessness and humility (Rule 8:3). Be pilgrims and strangers in this world... [As Christ was] (Rule 8:2). Love one another with the love of Christ (Test 59). Be perfect in His eyes (2nd let 3). Listen to the promptings of His Spirit (2nd let 14). 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). And what happiness we have in store for us for all eternity: to see His face (4th. Let vs. 10-14).

Yet, there seemed to be no reference to Clare as an image of Jesus Christ to be found in early writings, until I came across a book written in 1515 by a Franciscan friar, brother Mariano of Florence. The medieval Italian title may be translated as: *The book of the dignity and excellence of the order of the seraphic mother of the poor ladies Saint Clare of Assisi*. There, to my surprise, was a chapter entitled: "How Saint Clare was conformed to Christ in many ways and actions." Bartholomew of Pisa's work on St. Francis' conformity to Christ is well known among Franciscan scholars. Here was a corresponding consideration concerning Clare.

The author's elaboration upon 15 ways in which Clare's life conformed to Christ's spans 20 pages. I thought you might be interested in a very brief summary of this lovely panegyric on Saint Clare that may have been forgotten these past 500 years.

Mariano begins the chapter by saying:

Christ, wishing to renew in the world the blessings of His own sacrifice of himself, gave His standard to St. Francis, who perfectly, and with great fervor, renewed the life of Christ in the minds of men.... But just as Christ wished this renewal of his life among men, He wished also to send a woman having the same likeness and conformity to Himself who would renew His life within the feminine gender. And this was Saint

Clare, the first plant of the Order, as will be clearly shown.

Mariano continues:

Clare's birth was announced as that of a light which would illumine the world. She was reborn in the crib of poverty at St. Mary of the Angels Chapel on Palm Sunday. She lived poverty totally so that she could run after Christ without being burdened by anything. She taught poverty and loved it to the end and left it as a testament to her sisters, that for no reason should they desire anything but God.

Clare subjected herself, like Christ, in her obedience to St. Francis. And she was like Him in the many disciples she attracted to follow her way. Ladies came from all over the world to live according to her example of following Christ.

Clare was like Christ in her holiness and purity of life, in her penance and mortification; in her ability to multiply bread as Christ did; and in the manner in which she spread the Gospel way of life. As Christ sent His disciples two by two into every country, in the same way, Clare sent the sisters to establish new monasteries. Just as Christ amazed all by His teachings and miracles, so the evangelical life of Clare was confirmed by many miracles. Even Francis sent the sick to her to be healed by her intercession.

Clare formed her sisters according to the Gospel, and she governed them with kindness and prudence, careful for the welfare of each sister. Like Christ, she wished to serve rather than command. Like Christ, she was a mirror of life in which others saw Life Itself. The completeness of her imitation of Christ became the Rule of Life she handed down to her sisters, namely: to observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

She was like Christ in her endurance of weariness and infirmity. In 28 years of continual sickness she never complained, but praised the workings of God. Yet, Clare was most like

Christ in her crucifixion. Although she was not placed bodily on the cross, she contemplated the wounds of Christ without ceasing, and in spirit she was fused with Christ nailed to the cross. She even wished to undergo martyrdom so that she could instantly be transformed into an image of Christ.

Lastly, Clare was conformed with Christ in death. Christ wanted to die on the cross out of love for us. In the same way, Clare, for love of her crucified Spouse, desired to die on her cross; a cross that was not material but spiritual. Just as the cross of wood had length, width, height and depth, the spiritual cross upon which Clare died had the depth of humility so that God was able to fill her with an abundance of grace; her cross had the width of love, for God and neighbor; it had the height of that poverty which raises one from the earth and draws them to Christ; and it had the length of perseverance on which she endured to the end. These comprised her cross because, truly, they are a cross for our human nature. But she was willing to die on this cross so she could rise to new life in Christ.

This ancient account of Clare's equality to Francis' conformity to Christ is a valuable contribution to the emerging concepts concerning Clare's place in the history of the Franciscan Order. The text also prophetically reflects her continuing witness in the Church. Our Holy Father superbly captured the sense of Clare's mission in our own century, when, in speaking of her Centenary, he referred to it as "... a year of grace that will permit the people of God to pause in admiration before the charism of this Gospel woman in whom shines the mystery of Christ in a special way...." (Proto-Monastery Jan. 10, 1993)

## **Conclusion**

Centenary gatherings, like this one, taking place all over the world are an impressive manifestation of a general turning toward Clare at this time in history. All of a sudden

scholars are penetrating the oblivion in which she has been wrapped for so long. Authors are developing fresh ideas concerning her. Not only books, but monographs and newspaper articles have increased noticeably. Musicians are composing new melodies to praise her. Contemporary poets are sharing their contemplation of her depth and beauty.

Art historians are studying ancient images of Clare, while modern artists create new ones. Craftspeople are etching her in glass. Printers are producing posters, note cards and centenary stickers. Sculptors are carving her image in stone and clay, while ceramists design their molds of Clare. Potters are shaping their Clares of clay. Wood carvers dig her likeness into fine wood. Seamstresses are stitching Clare wall hangings. Embroiderers bring her forth on cloth. Even Bakers are frosting their cakes with Clare. Media technicians present movies, TV videos and radio interviews. And here in America hawkers sell the inevitable Centenary tee shirts, key chains, sun-catchers, and Saint Clare of Assisi coffee mugs.

Living through this year long celebration is a delightful experience! Never before have we witnessed anything like the extended celebrations taking place in her honor, nor could we have imagined the magnitude of this present scope of interest in St. Clare. It's a resurrection, surely! But we would do her an injustice if throughout all the activity we overlook the core of her meaning. Clare proclaims the presence of Christ that filled her whole being. It was His brightness that radiated from her.

Saint Clare of Assisi points us to Christ. To look at Clare is to see the image of Christ we are called to be. She has proven that the Christian way works, and she leaves us with inspiration and courage to pursue that same Way. We need her reminder that our own union with God is effected, ultimately, by the development of our capacity for God

through prayer, and especially through our contemplation of Christ, His Gospel, and the mystery of his cross as it makes its way through our lives.

Among the displays of homage rendered to Clare during this 8th. Centenary of her birth, I saw a chalice bearing an outline of Clare. Her life, her meaning and her message, are contained most perfectly in the symbol of that chalice bearing her image. Clare was a chalice containing the fullness of Christ. Her life was a pouring out of herself, so that others could quench their thirst for God at the Source of living water she became. Hers was truly "The Prayer of the Chalice":

Father, to You I raise my whole being, a vessel emptied of self. Accept Lord, this my emptiness, and so fill me with Yourself - Your Light, Your Love, Your Life - that these Your precious gifts may radiate through me and overflow the chalice of my heart into the hearts of all with whom I come in contact this day, revealing to them Your Beauty, Your Joy, Your Wholeness and the serenity of Your Peace which nothing can destroy. Amen. [Anonymous]

Sr. Mary Francis Hone, O.S.C.

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- Note: Some quotes from Clare's writings are my own translation or interpretation.

Prayer to St. Clare of Assisi.

Saint Clare

your consecration to God

took place on Palm Sunday.

We come to you, on this day,

to ask the gift of great fidelity

to our call to follow Christ,

by our renewed effort to observe

His Gospel.

Your beauty is your resemblance to Christ.

As the Father looks at your face lifted up toward him in prayer, the light he sees is the light of his Son, Jesus.

This is why we come to you to implore your intercession.

We bring our whole selves before you:

present us to the Lord

as dedicated to the following of Christ,

poor and crucified,

so that within our lives we may preserve  
peace and unity,  
and fervent prayer,  
and give of ourselves  
for the good of the world.

Intercede for our Holy Father:  
obtain from God the fulfillment of his prayers  
for the Church and for humanity.

Guard the government of our country,  
give them a right spirit  
and a love of the true common good.

You who were grateful to the people of Assisi  
and prayed for their needs  
and God's protection,  
watch over us, too, with special favor.

Obtain peace and unity for the world,  
justice in the division of the goods of the world,  
respect for life and nature,  
and where there is war,  
obtain the end of selfishness and hatred.

We ask this through Christ, "the King of Glory."

Amen.

Material for another talk possibly.

## **ST. CLARE OF ASSISI AND THE FOLLOWING OF CHRIST**

As the celebration of the 800th. birthday of St. Clare of Assisi progresses, her spirituality is being increasingly studied to reveal its value as a guide for today as it was for the people of her century. Her life is being revealed as one so filled with Christ that through her God became perceptible and real for others, both inside and outside the walls of her convent. Through her example they learnt what it means to be a Christian.

In Our Holy Father's recent encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor* (The Splendor of Truth), the following of Christ is defined as a "holding fast to the very person of Jesus...." (#20)

To follow Jesus Christ as a Christian means to become like Him by taking on His attitudes towards life, and with them a new way of being, both within ourselves and in our interactions with people, events and things. He taught us how to do this by trying "to draw us into His own consciousness through the stories He told, so that we could learn to think and feel and will and see the world as he does, and act in it as he does." (Beatrice Bruteau: *Radical Optimism* 133)

Clare was a woman who listened intently to Christ's words and strove to become like Him.

Through the spiritual direction contained in her letters she teaches us how to live each day with Christ. She wrote:

Love...Jesus...from the depth of your heart, and never let the thought of him leave your mind (Let Erm 11).

Rejoice with him (3rd let 9).

Suffer with him, weep with him, die with him (2nd let 21).

Holding him in our thoughts gives light to all our ways  
... He is the treasure buried in the field of this world  
... (3rd. lt.vs.7).

Carry him spiritually within yourself (3rd let 24).

Just as God descended into the womb of the Virgin Mary, this same God whom the heavens cannot contain, you can also bear within yourself.

### **Clare's Mysticism**

As a Christian mystic, Clare experienced God's presence in three ways. For example, in her Testament she alluded to God in a cosmic sense, as the "Father of mercies," (Test 1) - the Ultimate Reality in which we are contained like tiny drops of water in a vast ocean. Then, in the proceedings of the Canonization Process her sisters mentioned her

consciousness of the Divine Presence in every created person and thing. (Can Pro 14:9)  
But Clare knew God most perfectly through the strength of this relationship she had with  
Jesus Christ.

Underhill wrote that

In the experience of Divine Reality the greatest spiritual minds have always  
discerned an overwhelming certitude of a personal contact, a love answering to  
love. (Underhill 162) It was this kind of association with Christ that led Clare, too,  
deeper into the experience of the Trinity.

One of the means she used to make Jesus a reality in her life was to consciously direct all  
her natural faculties, both intellectual and sensual, all her healthy feminine emotions as a  
woman, toward the God-Man, as to a spouse lovingly present to her. By employing the  
imagination and feelings in this manner the whole person is involved so that it learns to  
interact in the realm of the spirit in an authentically human way. She wrote of Jesus as:

A spouse surpassing all others in his greatness and  
dignity (1st.let, vs.8 & 10).

Who is kindness itself, ever ready to fill our deepest desires. His very being  
contains a joy ready to overflow  
into ours. His presence can give new life to anyone no  
matter how spiritually dead they may feel themselves to  
be (4th. let vs. 11-13).

Who refreshes us whenever we turn our hearts to him (4th.

let 12).

Whose love is so real it can be felt (4th. let 11).

### **Jesus As God in Clare's Following of Christ**

Besides using concepts of human love, Clare's bond with Christ included, in one and the same movement, the awe due the fulness of the Godhead. Her expressions of familiarity never lacked the theological balance typical of thirteenth century spirituality. She adored the human Jesus equally as:

The Son of God Most High, the Splendor of Eternal Glory (3rd.let vs. 12 & 4th.let vs. 14).

(Who) reigns eternally in heaven and on earth (1st. let vs. 17).

(Who) made all things under heaven (3rd. let vs. 7).

(Who) spoke and all was created (1st. let vs. 17).

He is the incarnation of the Divine essence (3rd. let vs. 13).

He is the Lamb without spot who took away the sins of the world (4th. let vs. 8).

(He) is brightness without end (4th. let vs. 14).

## **Clare's Following of the Poor and Suffering Christ**

Clare seemed especially overwhelmed by this God Who chose poverty and suffering for our sake, and she consciously chose to commit herself to the cross together with Christ. (McInally 328) Her prayer-life centered upon Him who had lived on earth as a poor, rejected, and crucified man. She wrote:

Contemplate Christ, more beautiful than the sons of men,  
(who) became for your salvation the lowest of men, despised,  
struck, scourged untold times throughout his body, and then [He] died amid the  
sufferings of the cross....meditate constantly on the mysteries of the cross (Let  
Erm).

Love Christ, [who was] poor and crucified (1st. let vs. 13).

Let us not fear to be contemptible, for Christ did not hesitate to become  
contemptible for our sake (2nd.  
let, vs. 19)

Clare knew hard times. Besides the terror of being caught in the middle of endless bloody feuds between the towns, Clare mentions in her Testament the sisters' personal troubles. They had to endure every manner of deprivation, poverty, hard work, endless trials, shame, and not the least was the contempt they had to endure simply because they were a group of women claiming they could survive by trusting in Divine Providence, and the work of their own hands.

But Clare went on to say "they found great joy in these trials." (Test 28) This response is important, because it tells us her concentration upon a suffering Christ was neither sentimental, masochistic, nor a product of the times, but rather, an attitude solidly rooted in the Paschal Mystery. Clare contemplated the wounds of the risen Lord to discover what we all need to learn. That our wounds will become our glory, too. That our bloody sweat, our crosses, and our crucifixions, can become occasions of inner development and spiritual resurrection.

Of course, our culture doesn't believe in this attitude towards misfortune; it demands that life go according to plans, or at least in a way that's just and fair. But God knows we're capable of strengths and possibilities and spiritual capacities we'll never know unless we accept the challenges that stretch us. Clare had to have believed in the purpose of suffering, and endured much of it in her lifetime to have achieved the stature she did.

### **The Spirit of Christ in St. Clare**

This awareness of the transcendent dimension of all of life, especially its crosses, comes to us gradually as the attitudes of Christ become stronger in us. Then we become more truly human, more capable of living the highest human values. Then we become, like Jesus, the way, the truth and the life for our world. Clare experienced this indwelling Spirit in herself as:

A power so great it can give new life to lifeless  
spirits (4th. let vs. 13).

A power that does not dominate but gives new life....

a life in which we become like God (1st. let vs. 14).

A power surpassing the power anyone else could have  
over her (1st. let vs. 9).

This indwelling Spirit so enlightened and informed Clare that she became a powerful force for good, known around the world though she lived enclosed in a convent. Our world needs desperately to be touched by this spirit, and it needs us to do it. But, as Evelyn Underhill wrote:

At present, we tend to starve our possible centers of regeneration, or let them starve themselves by our encouragement of incessant activity at the expense of a more contemplative mode of existence. Until this is remedied we shall get nothing really [done in this world] (Underhill 218).

### **Clare's Conformity to Christ.**

The most prominent theme in Clare's writings may be the concept of following Christ and becoming like Him. And yet, when I examined all that was written about her after she died, I found that she was praised for being everything but the image of Christ she strove to be.

There is a study by Caroline Walker Bynum, in her book *Fragmentation and Redemption*, that sheds an educated light on this situation. Prof. Bynum found that although the writings of the feminine saints and mystics of the Middle Ages prove that during their lifetime the women themselves aspired to become Christ, it remained the accepted custom of the biographers to cite holy women as images of Mary rather than of Christ. While Clare indeed encouraged her sisters to stay close to the Mother of God, the most

perfect image of her Son, it was more in the sense of contemplating Christ, as Mary did, so they could become more like Him. 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 vs. 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).

Still, there seemed to be no reference to Clare as an image of Jesus Christ to be found in early writings, until I came across a medieval Italian work written in 1515 by a Franciscan Friar, Brother Mariano of Florence. The title may be translated: *The Book of the dignity and excellence of the order of the seraphic mother of the poor ladies Saint Clare of Assisi*. There, to my surprise, was a chapter entitled: "How Saint Clare was conformed to Christ in many ways and actions." Bartholomew of Pisa's work on Francis of Assisi's conformity to Christ is well known among Franciscan scholars. Here was a corresponding reference to Clare. The author's elaboration upon 15 ways in which Clare's life conformed to Christ's spans 20 pages. The following is a very brief summary of a lovely panegyric on St. Clare that has been overlooked for almost 500 years.

Mariano begins this chapter by saying:

Christ, wishing to renew in the world the blessings of His own sacrifice of himself, gave His standard to St. Francis, who perfectly, and with great fervor, renewed the life of Christ in the minds of men....

But just as Christ wished this renewal of his life among men, He wished also to send a woman having the same likeness and conformity to Christ who would renew His life within the feminine gender. And this was St. Clare, the first plant of the order, as will be clearly shown....

Mariano continues:

Clare's birth was announced as that of a light which would illumine the world. She was reborn in the crib of poverty at St. Mary of the Angels Chapel on Palm Sunday. She lived poverty totally so that she could run after Christ without being burdened by any thing. She taught poverty and loved it to the end and left it as a testament to her sisters, that for no reason should they desire anything but God.

Clare subjected herself, like Christ, in her obedience to St. Francis. And she was like Him in the many disciples she attracted to follow her way. Ladies came from all over the world to live according to her example of following Christ.

Clare was like Christ in her holiness and purity of life,

in her penance and mortification; in her ability to multiply bread as Christ did; and in the manner in which she spread the Gospel way of life. As Christ sent His disciples two by two into every country, in the same way, Clare sent the sisters to establish new monasteries.

Just as Christ amazed all by His teachings and miracles, so the evangelical life of Clare was confirmed by many miracles. Even Francis sent the sick to her to be healed by her intercession.

Clare formed her sisters according to the Gospel, and she governed them with kindness and prudence, careful for the welfare of each sister. Like Christ, she wished to serve rather than command. Like Christ, she was a mirror of life in which others saw Life Itself.

The completeness of her imitation of Christ became the Rule of Life she handed down to her sisters, namely: to observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

She was like Christ in her endurance of weariness and infirmity. In 28 years of continual sickness she never complained, but praised the workings of God. Yet, Clare was most like Christ in her crucifixion. Although she was not placed bodily on the cross, she contemplated the wounds of Christ without ceasing, and in spirit she was

fused with Christ nailed to the cross. She even wished to undergo martyrdom so that she could instantly be transformed into an image of Christ.

Lastly, Clare was conformed with Christ in death. Christ wanted to die on the cross out of love for us. In the same way, Clare, for love of her crucified Spouse, desired to die on her cross; a cross that was not material but spiritual. Just as the cross of wood had length, width, height and depth, the spiritual cross upon which Clare died had the depth of humility so that God was able to fill her with an abundance of grace; her cross had the width of love, for God and neighbor; it had the height of that poverty which raises one from the earth and draws them to Christ; and it had the length of perseverance on which she endured to the end. These comprised her cross because, truly, they are a cross for our human nature.

But she was willing to die on this cross so she could rise to new life in Christ.

To look at Clare is to see the image of Christ we are called to be.

She has proven that the Christian way works, and she leaves us with inspiration and courage to pursue that Way. We need her reminder that our own union with God is effected, ultimately, by the development of our capacity for God through prayer, and especially through our contemplation of Christ, His Gospel, and the mystery of his cross as it makes its way through our lives.

Our Holy Father superbly captured the sense of Clare's mission in the 20th. century, when, in speaking of her 8th. Centenary now in process, he referred to it as "a year of

grace that will permit the people of God to pause in admiration before the charism of this Gospel woman in whom shines the mystery of Christ in a special way...."

(Protomonastery Jan. 10, 1993)