

EVERYTHING AFTER GOD: LIVING THE SPIRIT OF CLARE IN TODAY'S WORLD

How wonderful it was to see the topic suggested for this presentation: "Living the Spirit of Clare in today's world." Can you imagine what it was like for me to see people's interest in understanding and living the spirit of Clare? Something is happening; Clare is emerging.

Had we been paying attention over these many years, we might have noticed that Clare was passively identified as the second founder of the Poor Clares, and if we had noticed, we also might appreciate with some excitement what is happening now. It wasn't long ago that there was very little acknowledgement of Clare's leadership role within the Franciscan Order.

Those of us who professed the Form of Life that Clare wrote were rarely better informed than others. When I entered the monastery in 1954, Ignatius Brady had recently published the English translation of Lothar Hardick's *The Legend and Writings of Saint Clare of Assisi*. In the late fifties a few writers produced works on Clare, but the fact remained that little else had been done in English since Paschal Robinson's studies around the turn of the century.

Poor Clare Communities depended totally upon our Friars for information about our foundress. Somehow we supposed that the friars with their university educations would know everything there was to know about St. Clare. We often wished Clare would have left us one complete book that would clearly explain her spirit, her way to grow in union with God, and her intentions for her Order. I remember thinking how fortunate nuns of other Orders, other traditions were with their many spiritual writings to guide them. We Clares seemed to have such a meager input from our foundress.

Now, all this has changed! So much is happening! Yes! Clare is emerging. In this post Vatican II era of "refounding" the varied expressions of religious life within the Church, the Franciscan Order has re-discovered its foundation and nourishment in two roots: Francis *and* Clare. The friars claimed Clare as their Abbess, too. From the fraternity's earliest days, we learn from the breviary of Saint Francis that the friars said a special prayer every day "for our Abbess." (Lainati, vol. 1, p. 87).

Today, Secular Franciscans are turning to St. Clare for guidance in their spiritual lives, while we, her daughters, are savoring anew the wisdom of our spiritual

Mother. The entire Franciscan Order is rediscovering the woman who lived the highest ideals of our Holy Father Francis.

Not only the Poor Man of Assisi and his followers found inspiration and guidance in Clare, but also the ordinary townspeople discovered her spiritual leadership, consolation in their troubles, and healing in their illnesses. The townspeople supported the community of Poor Ladies in return for the good they received from them. It was the townspeople who clamored for Clare's canonization, and her city still claims her and celebrates her memory.

Enclosed women, like the Poor Ladies of San Damiano offered needed services to the people among whom they lived, especially if they were gifted as Clare was. Through personal prayer and their availability for prayerful intercessions, the Poor Ladies bore much fruit within the Church precisely because their lives reached the people. They were present as "a mirror and example" of the highest ideals of the Gospel, (Test. 20) for those who are far away and for those who are near, (Test. 58) as Clare proclaimed in her Testament.

Her message is for everyone, and it is the vocation of Clare's Women to continue to live the fullness of this message within the Church. Our lifestyle embodies the unpopular lessons of the Good News: The Paschal Mystery that brings new life; the suffering from which springs the happiness of knowing God.

In 1875 Pius IX wanted to send Poor Clares of the Primitive Rule to America. He asked for volunteers for this undertaking. Three volunteered. The Holy Father decided two Sister, Maddalena and Constance – because they were blood sisters and would need this kind of bond to help them through the difficult mission ahead of them – should be sent. He spoke to them concerning his intention that they establish Poor Clare Monasteries of the Primitive Observance in America. I would like to read a passage from his words of instruction to them:

You will go to a distant land where people are to be found who are no different than pagans, living and dying without Baptisms. Indeed you will find men of great wealth, men completely immersed in the business of commerce and gambling on the stock market, intent to reap every temporal advantage and indifferent to any but material interests. So far as concerns the soul, you will learn that they take little or no interest. As for the higher forms of the spiritual life, life devoted exclusively to prayer and contemplation, the mere idea is treated by many with contempt and derision.

You, my dear daughters, must be a striking example to the people of your adopted home by your detachment from all earthly goods. Your example will be assuredly an eloquent sermon, and together with your prayer and communion with God will obtain for many souls the grace to perceive that true happiness is not in the possession of material and ephemeral good. (Church in Nebraska vol. 2, p. 223)

Poor Clares try to live out this deeper dimension of evangelical poverty by a life that is centered, not around the performance of any external ministry, but centered primarily in poverty and prayer. Today we, like all Franciscans, are still immersed to varying degrees in a materialistic society agonizing in its abundance, groping for something to fill its innate tendency toward fulfillment and inner peace.

As we strive to be lights for others we do well to look to St. Clare of Assisi, a holy woman whose example inspires and guides us in sustaining our ideals. We aspire to be a stabilizing influence in modern society, and through our Clarian tradition, we endeavor to give life to the Gospel. We do well to ponder frequently Clare's convictions so that we might be dauntless in living the Seraphic dimension of our vocation with the same wholeheartedness with which we have pursued the dimensions of fraternity, service and mission.

Humankind always stands in need of mentors. Past or present, their spiritual attainments qualify them to lead others through the process of "becoming free" from ego control. This freedom gives the person the needed impetus to live in a truer, deeper self, where God is found. You and I need to become acquainted with the means Clare used to become "free," so we can learn from her how to open our whole being to the transcendence for which our humanity longs. Ever in our humanness we mentor others in their spiritual journey.

Our Holy Father, John Paul II, was truly inspired in an address to a group of Poor Clares: "The discovery of St. Clare, so important for the life of the Church, must be repeated in our day" (Assisi 1982). We all need to become more acquainted with this woman who has presented us, in her limited writings and throughout her life, with such an eminently Franciscan spirituality. She literally sings of the joy of having nothing, and offers proof of the happiness the personal assurance of God's love can give to those who are ready to receive it. Perhaps this is her special mission to us at a time when the world stands in great need of liberation from itself for the attainment of all that is most truly human.

What then do we mean by the spirit of Clare? How can it be lived outside a monastery? This presentation is a sharing of my studies and my reflections on our Mother Clare, and of my personal experience of the life she pioneered and made possible for women. I propose to examine the uniqueness of her charism, its universal message especially as it is directed to Franciscans, and finally, how we Poor Clares, her sisters live her values today.

The Charism of St. Clare

To live the spirit of Clare is to partake, in some measure, in her gifts and graces. Clare entered into the Franciscan charism as it was lived by a group of men. She did so with the gift of her womanhood, and as the recipient of personal graces. Consequently, another form of the basic charism was created: the charism of St. Clare of Assisi, a witness to Franciscan poverty in the contemplative lifestyle.

A charism is energy, a thrust rooted in the spirit that compels a person to action. When a woman makes her profession in the Order of St. Clare, she receives a unique energy from the foundress' charism. If someone deviates from the charism she breaks with this source of grace. So, too, the desire to live Clare's spirit today is a call to share in her personal response to the grace of the Holy Spirit, in the particular emphasis she gave to the incarnation of Christ, and to Gospel living.

If we turn to the Legend of St. Clare of Assisi to discern how we might go about living the Gospel we might be discouraged to find that she appears to have been a paragon of every virtue, so much so that she was compared to the Mother of God. In all probability, to speak about living in her spirit requires an explanation of living the Gospel in its entirety. When we turn to her writings we observe that her wholeness was the outcome of her concentration upon the poor Christ:

Gaze upon that mirror each day, ... that you may adorn yourself within and without with beautiful robes,... covered...with the flowers and garments of all the virtues. Indeed, blessed poverty, holy humility, an inexpressible charity are (all) reflected in that mirror.... (4Lag 15)

Not only did she gaze upon the Mirror, Christ, she entered into Him. Clare was, above all, a lover of the poor Christ and the poverty He embraced, the poverty He taught as the way to become like the Father. She contemplated in endless awe the material and spiritual poverty of the Man who was God: "O astonishing poverty! The King of angels, the Lord of heaven and earth, is laid in a manger." (4Lag 20-21)

Christ is so central to Clare's charism that every time I write about her I feel haunted by the thought of her saying: "Don't talk about me, talk about Christ." She can readily be identified among the medieval anchoresses, women particularly dedicated to the love of Christ and espousal union with him. Those who dwelt in the hills around Assisi were called "Christiana" – "the Christians," a name Francis is known to have used in reference to Clare. When questioned about the marginality of their lives, anchoresses might well have offered as reason for their convictions: *Caritas Christi urget nos!* [The Love of Christ impels us!]" (cf. Francesca Steele)

Clare's writings portray just such a person, for unlike an Abbess of a strictly monastic tradition upon whom their subjects must depend as channels of every grace, Clare consistently pointed her sisters away from herself, to Christ as the only Source of grace and the only Way to the Father. She taught them rather to make themselves open and pliable to the work of His Spirit within them. (cf Rc1 VII, 2)

Clare's writings reveal her effort and care to contemplate Christ as constantly as possible: "Never let the thought of Him leave your mind," she taught her sisters (Ler 11). In this loving contemplation of Jesus she learned the poverty of trust in the Father's loving Providence, of relinquishing our human tendency to refer all things to ourselves and pass judgment from this narrow perspective; the poverty of being satisfied with little, of sharing with others; the poverty that gives life to our highest human faculty, spirit, and deepens our capacity for God: "If you wish to be perfect go, and sell all you posses ...and you will have treasure in heaven, then come, follow me: (MT 19-21).

"Poverty is the pearl of the Gospel," wrote Bonaventure (Defense of the Mendicants). There is no other way to the Kingdom of God. Clare's charism begins and ends with the priceless adornments of this treasure: from the daily material poverty she shared with her sisters, to the interior and spiritual poverty in which she found God.

Evangelical Poverty

The first stages of the grace of poverty were operative in Clare's life when she was still very young. She was empathetic towards the needy and denied herself some of her abundance to give it to the poor. Soon this was not enough; she had to be really poor. Francis brought her further along the road of poverty,

encouraging her to leave everything the world could offer so that she might come to know God.

Later, at San Damiano, Clare denied herself to the extreme in every way. She taught by work and example the importance of not complaining when they lacked even necessities: "Bring a humble heart with you when you walk the way of need," she would say, "It will win eternal riches!" (Notification of Death trans. by David Temple, O.F.M.) She never relegated the actual pinch of poverty to some romantic observance, nor did the other sisters. Their life of poverty included practical expressions of limiting themselves to the simple necessities of life, procuring food for the day, and working with their hands to earn a living.

However, to be poor within the dimensions of the Good News means more than denying ourselves the material things we've grown to depend upon for our contentment. It means becoming free even of our desires for positions of power, and our use of control for egocentric gains. Francis had to command Clare to accept the position of Abbess. She was only too aware that prestige and power place us above others and give us a feeling of satisfaction with ourselves and less need of God. Clare was tempted to value her natural beauty and gifts above spiritual graces, too. Her response was that there was nothing more valuable than knowing God and doing his will (cf. LegCl 19). Still, deprivation of various temporal advantages doesn't make us followers of Christ in itself, though it does play an essential role in turning our faculties toward God.

When Clare fought for the "Privilege of Poverty" it was not the shell of external observance she was entirely concerned about, even though this was definitely foremost in importance to her. There will always be conflict concerning the external observance of poverty, even among Clare's sisters. We can all grapple with the tangibles of poverty more easily than with its spirit; still, we can't separate its two dimensions, either. In solid pursuit of total poverty, Clare upheld them both. The early friars had to battle this out, and for them too, the external observance they argued about had little to do with following the example of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Leader who emptied Himself even of His Divinity to show them what it takes to know God.

When we speak of Clare's love of poverty, it's all of these things, yet at the same time poverty goes far beyond them. It's a relationship with God that makes possible an ever greater awakening to the Spirit deep inside each one of us. It's the Paschal Mystery proclaimed by the Gospel: our return to the image and likeness of God in which we were created; something utterly marvelous, yet

totally missed by most people. It's even unfortunate that "poverty" is the word used to describe this magnificent process that has the power to help us become more like God. The Eastern Church uses the word *Theosis*: Our transformation into God.

Contemporary usage of the word "poverty" denotes destitution, hunger, street people, and welfare. People in those situations are longing for things – things they desperately need, things unjustly denied them. There is little in society's notion of material impoverishment to reconcile it with the profound spiritual value of a poverty that freely relinquishes all we naturally tend to reach out for, so that we might know God.

To set aside many good things to live in a way we can't even imagine is a challenge too hard to grasp and far too risky to do. It's easier to keep our energies so satisfied by tangible things that we never have to deal with spiritual needs. This is the impetus behind consumerism which has become something of an epidemic, and the hunger for constant entertainment. This is the attitude of a world that has never experienced something of its own spiritual capacity for Transcendent Reality. Clare warned us: The experience of God could not be had "with the gnawing concern for temporal things" (LegCl 13).

Evangelical poverty falls outside the possibility of understanding for a large portion of the world that has never experienced the kind of inner satiety that leaves us with less need for a superfluity of novelties and diversions. In their search for happiness many often work harder and longer hours to acquire more than they can use in a lifetime. People have the longing for transcendence God placed in their hearts but little knowledge of how to make it happen.

When Francis and Clare saw their Church and society losing this very basis of Christianity, they did something about it. They started living it. Now, as then, the overwhelming need is for Christians to make room in their lives for this basic Gospel spirit of poverty and so create a healthy tension that can maintain and deepen their spiritual capacities while functioning in a society that gives them little support in this area.

Clare calls us to dare to have the courage to loosen the grasp of whatever stands in the way of our spiritual development, so we can actually find inner peace and happiness, even in this life, because, as Clare would say, "To love the things of this world (too much) is to lose the fruit of love" (cf. 1Lag I, 25).

Clarian Poverty

But in all of this wasn't Clare simply living the poverty Francis taught her? Didn't their love of the "Most High Poverty" vibrate with equal intensity? Why is living the spirit of Clare so different from following Francis in his poverty? Few ever understood Francis and the love of his life: "Lady Poverty," as did Clare. Yet, her fusion with Jesus and Evangelical poverty did not result in an exactly identical witness. There is the same basic charism to live Gospel Poverty, but a different emphasis.

As closely united in their ideals as were these two hearts, we are dealing with different personalities, each with a unique vocation. There have always been, and must always be, levels of interpretation within the Franciscan family. Clare had to do her own reading of the Gospel as we all do. St. Francis's last farewell to his brothers gives us a handy reminder of this fact: "I have done what was mine to do," he told them, "May Christ teach you what you are to do" (2Cel 214).

The same passage that directs me to base my evangelical life around Christ's interior life and love of the Father by becoming a nun, will speak differently to someone else. Clare was attracted to the poverty Francis dared to live, but not necessarily for the same reason. By a simple comparison, we can see that Francis was a mystic who followed Jesus by traveling about preaching the love of a God who emptied Himself to take on our poor human nature.

Rejecting material things was Francis' way of being like Jesus who gave himself away. He was adamant against focusing one's life on money and accumulating possessions. A material witness to Gospel poverty was vital to the reform of the thirteenth century Church and Francis embodied this needed response. Francis was called to be a manifestation of Christ for the world in a special manner. He would re-create exterior events from our Lord's life to imprint them in people's minds and hearts, like the scene of Greccio, or the Last Supper he re-lived with his friars. He frequently went apart to pray as Jesus did, to learn the Father's will. He longed to know Christ even to feeling the pain Jesus felt in his agony in order to be more like Jesus, poor and crucified.

On the other hand, Clare was a feminine mystic who lived an enclosed life with a group of women. Their ministry within the Church was intercession. Although they were truly poor in material goods, they had a suitable house with approximately six acres of land around it for solitude and a garden to provide for their needs. Clare allowed extra clothing, and acceptance of money in return for the work of their hands – something Francis forbade the friars.

Clare was called to witness particularly to the poverty that makes possible inner transformation and union with God. She focused on the single mindedness of an interior poverty that prepared a dwelling for the Godhead within her own being as the Mother of Jesus did. "One thing is necessary," she wrote, "and I bear witness to that one thing..." (2Lag 10). She taught her sisters to leave all things even their loved ones, so they could be occupied with God alone. She taught them the poverty of interior silence so they might know the depths of God (LegCl 36). She taught and encouraged them to desire nothing but God so they might experience the manifestations of His love and His presence. She told them of the "Incomparable treasure hidden in the field of the world and of the human heart..." (33Lag 7).

The example of a cloistered life with its absence of pleasures and escapes was a powerful statement of these radical teachings. Moreover, Clare expressed the mysticism of poverty in writing, something Francis did not do. She wrote of the ascetical path of self-emptying that attains transcendent union with God with the exuberance and intensity of one who has received the rewards of walking its ways:

If you suffer with Him, you will reign with Him.
[If you] weep with Him, you shall rejoice with Him;
[If you] die with Him on the cross of tribulation, you shall possess heavenly mansions in the splendor of the saints (2Lag 21)
Because of this you shall share always and forever the glory of the kingdom in place of earthly and passing things, and everlasting treasure instead of those that perish, and you shall live forever (2Lag 23)

And, of transforming union she wrote:

Happy, indeed, is she to whom it is given to share in this sacred banquet so that she might cling with all her heart to Him whose beauty all the blessed hosts of heaven unceasingly admire, Whose affection excites, Whose contemplation refreshes, Whose kindness fulfills, whose delight replenishes, Whose remembrance delightfully shines.... (4Lag 9-12).

This is not to imply that anything was lacking in Francis's embrace of poverty – far from it – but merely to clarify the unique witness each presented. We need to expose ourselves further now, to Clare's concept of "highest poverty" as to a picture set within the framework of Francis' life and doctrine that captured his highest ideals.

Poverty Most High

In their studies of the Rules of Saints Francis and Clare, Franciscan scholars have translated the Latin word "altissimus" as "highest." In our attempt to capture something of Clare's concept of poverty, perhaps we need to be mindful of its alternate translations, such as: "deepest poverty," "profound poverty," or, in Thomas Merton's words, "the supreme poverty of having nothing but God." Not that we can ever hope to begin to understand the mysticism of poverty of Francis and Clare experienced it: this emptiness that enables us to be filled, this poorness that makes us rich.

Teilhard de Chardin wrote that though the mystics talk about poverty, they actually want more than the rest of us ever dream of. We know this was true of Clare. Celano wrote that Clare wanted Christ and she headed straight for what she wanted, so that "nothing transitory would separate the lover from her Beloved or would impede her way with the Lord" (LegCl 14).

There is a 12th Century painting by Hildegard of Bingen who seems also to have been captivated by the mystery of poverty Clare later conveyed through her writing. In Hildegard's painting the icon-like figure of Christ, cast entirely in gold leaf, is seated on the top of a mountain. At the foot of the mountain are two human figures. One is called "The Act of Seeing God Unceasingly." The entire figure is covered with many eyes. The second is "Poverty in Spirit" so that it cannot be distinguished from the brightness of God. Here, we can visually draw closer to Clare's concept of "Most High Poverty."

To say that poverty is of the substance of God means that it is something so like God that when we are inwardly poor we become empowered to know Him and possess Him. "The universe and all creation cannot contain their Creator," Clare said... "only the human spirit" (3Lag 22). This interior poverty can be compared to the "nada" of St. John of the Cross: there must be "nothing" in the way. Not that we ignore the world and all its beauty, but that we do not remain fixed in things themselves or want them for selfish ends. The spirit of poverty enables us to contemplate the universe that lies just beneath exterior forms waiting to be discovered. Clare could see it and she calls us to look at all created things, yet see within and beyond them so that we might come to know their God. "She reminded them (her sisters) to acknowledge God when they saw beautiful trees, flowers, bushes; and likewise, always to praise Him for and in all things when they saw all peoples and creatures" (cf. Proc XIV, 9).

Everything After God

Clare wrote two words that are, for me, the key to an understanding of how Clare lived “highest poverty” throughout her life. The Latin words are “post Deum” (“after God”). Clare wrote in her Testament that Francis was, “after God,” her “one consolation and support” (TestCl 38). Everyone and everything in this world came “after God.” Even Francis, as dear as he was to her, remained the friend of the Bridegroom.

These two words “after God,” capture her spirit perfectly. They are two words that could change the world of each one of us. It seems to me, then, that if we are to consider how we can live her spirit in today’s world we must begin by trying to sift through our lives to discern ways in which we can begin to put everything “after God.” Placing God first as the center of our lives becomes our truest reality. “O holy poverty,” Clare wrote, “God promises the Kingdom of Heaven ...to all who possess and desire you” (1Lag 16).

Heaven is the human spirit. The human spirit becomes God’s kingdom when nothing else controls it and holds it in its power. Clare convinced Agnes of Prague, and certainly countless others, that it makes sense to strive to attain this kingdom, even by trading whatever we hold dear, because this trade-off will be the measure of our vision of God forever. What a great and praiseworthy exchange: to leave the things of time for those of eternity, to choose the goods of heaven for the goods of earth, to receive the hundredfold in place of the one, and to possess a blessed and eternal life!

As long as Clare lived she kept the true meaning of poverty alive long after Francis was gone, and she’s there for us today to show us how to make sense of depriving ourselves of so many good things by reminding us of the true nature of Gospel poverty: to make possible God’s reign within us. In the first letter to Agnes she wrote that “Because...you have sought to store up spiritual treasures rather than worldly goods...your reward will be the treasures of the spirit” (cf. 1Lag 22). Whatever we might seem to give up will be replaced by something far more valuable. This is what the Lord meant by our receiving a hundredfold for whatever we leave for his sake.

Clare’s Poverty in Practice

By now, you might be wondering how could we possibly aspire to live so completely for the Lord? In general, it means we have to begin by wanting to believe in God enough to make a place for him in our everyday lives. We all

carry individually-chosen possessions, so, the same “letting go’ may not be required from everyone. But a beginning might mean as simple a thing as letting go of the sounds we use to fill the empty spaces of our life. We need to carve out of our day moments for tuning in to something deep inside ourselves. These quiet moments can be a real form of poverty. It can be so difficult to let go of our dependence upon sounds that soothe us, or thoughts we like to entertain, even very good thoughts that habitually occupy our minds. Then some day we might become faintly aware of a part of ourselves that has been set free, and this might signal the commencement of relationship with a God we can’t see, hear or touch. This is only the beginning.

Gradually, we have to orient our thoughts, affections, memory, and imagination to spiritual things by simply setting aside time to think about Jesus more, in scriptural scenes, perhaps. Or, we might try to recognize him in the living, suffering and dying in our own lives and the lives of people around us. This supplies definite concepts of God to dwell upon, and these become the new value system out of which we live. Clare impressed upon her readers the importance of: “Look [ing] at him, think [ing] of him, and dwell [ing] in his presence” (cf. 2Lag 20). Clare spelled this out as a method of prayer:

First, take your thoughts from all things.

Then, become aware of God’s presence.

Fix your affections upon Christ who is the form of the Divinity.

Forget everything you know about yourself and try to just be there with God for that moment.

In this manner, Clare promises, you will come to the enjoyment of God.

But, she adds, only after we have done away with all that keeps us entrapped (cf. 3 Lag 12-15).

Growth in poverty of spirit means becoming loosened from our ego traps of seeing and reacting to the people, events and things of life solely in reference to our selves so we can begin to recognize and more to remind ourselves that God waits within the human spirit, and expresses his love for us through the kindness of the people around us. He shows his will for us in every small and great happening in our lives. Simply stated, often no other possibility exists. The outcome of this new attitude might well be that we no longer need the sense of security and accomplishments other things brought us.

Whenever we experience God’s presence during our lifetime, it will be because for that moment, or whatever length of time it might be, we were truly poor. For a moment we let go the self-centered reference point from which we habitually live. For a moment we aren’t expecting something for ourselves. It will mean, if

only for an instant, that our spirit has grown strong enough and free enough to perceive something beyond ourselves. Clare described it this way:

You shall share always and forever the glory of the kingdom of heaven in place of earthly and passing things, and everlasting treasure instead of those that perish, and you shall live forever (2Lag 23).

This is just a longer way around the Gospel text Jesus preached: "How blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5: 3). Having considered Clare's charism and its qualities as a tool we can use in our spiritual groping, what about those of us who are closest to Clare and profess to live her ideals? How do Clare's women keep her spirit alive today?

Clare's Women Today

Poor Clares share with other religious the difficulties of living Gospel poverty in a materialistic society. Presently life is much more complicated, so that at first glance our living standards might appear to be far removed from the preserve that remains of San Damiano. Among the various branches of our Order there is an obvious lack of uniformity in the expression of our form of life. This varied form of life, developed through the centuries, confirms that we experience the same tensions with which Clare struggled, between those who chose her evangelical expression of the life and our revised constitutions translate it into practical implementation for the twentieth century.

We've learned from Clare that Christ is our Way, and only He can teach us what poverty is all about. Only He can give us the courage to let poverty do its transforming work in us, day after day. For this reason we continue the privilege of Eucharistic Adoration as continually as possible throughout each day in most of our monasteries. We work hard for a living, doing much the same assortment of activities our earliest predecessors did: making Liturgical garments, communion breads, habits for the friars, and doing printing. Those entering in recent years are bringing other skills. We never cease to be amazed at God's loving Providence supplying what is lacking in our earnings. When Clare turned to Christ in the Eucharist for the protection of the sisters, it is said Jesus replied that He would always take care of us. He does this through the kindness of His people, and we in turn intercede for them. As far as is possible we share with others the food and materials we receive.

Relinquishing the possessions of ego we all amass inside ourselves is the more demanding form of poverty. Our close community living snatches a lot of this right from under us, in much the same way married life can help people to forget their selves and care for others. We really need to keep Christ before us if we're

going to allow ourselves to be remade in this way. This must be why Clare so immersed herself in the wisdom of the poor and suffering Christ. We have to learn from Jesus how to love enough to allow the pain of growth to happen, to accept and even welcome the dying as He did.

In the past the attitude of letting go all things was taught us from our first day in the monastery. There was no time to grow to the point of not needing material comforts, or to the spiritual refinement of distinguishing ego from spirit. We were immediately inserted into a condition we recall as the time when we were really poor, when each sister really had nothing. It was taken for granted that we forgo what are now considered basic human supports of communication and sharing. In the struggles of the heart we had no one but the Lord, so we would learn to depend on His presence in our lives.

In the early 1980's, I took part in a psychology practicum for formation directors. In our sessions together we reflected seriously on our past Poor Clare life to discern what had helped or hindered our formation so that we might learn to apply these experiences to present formation questions. Unanimously, we affirmed that through the deprivations of cloistered life our faith had been strengthened, because through it all, God was all we had.

The circumstances of our past formation have been updated to conform to the psychological needs of contemporary society. Yet those of us who came through those difficult but happy years admit that although we wouldn't want to go through them again, we wouldn't want to change them either because of what they had given us.

When Clare urged her sisters not to give up the very narrow road of the enclosed life because it would bring them spiritual riches, I believe I know what she meant. The deepest expression of our poverty is precisely our enclosed life. It purposely limits our space, our opportunities for communication, travel and the assortment of activities that tend to leave people scattered in so many directions they can never get hold of what is within themselves. This more exacting poverty is added to the renunciation all religious make by their vows. The fact that our enclosure is a vow tends to be difficult for people to understand oftentimes, but I am convinced it is important to our unique identity. The many women who embraced such a lifestyle in Clare's day were part of the new movement of spirituality preached by the friars. Enclosure created a place of silence for prayer making possible contemplative life in the cities, which is precisely the direction that spirituality was taking in the thirteenth century. For

those of us who have this vow, it is a reminder that ours is just such a life, not of withdrawal but of solitude in the midst of the people.

Not everyone is called to this; the Poor Clare is. But in the light of our considerations today on the depth of poverty Clare lived and taught, and why she did so perhaps you will be able to make a positive evaluation of this aspect of Poor Clare life. Those of us who have felt called to follow Christ as one of Clare's women, feel convinced of what we have to do for our world. We have found in our plain and simple lives that every conceivable luxury will never fill the void within humanity; that every pleasurable or exciting episode of our lives passes away; but that to forfeit all these for a profound awareness of God's presence can be a humanly satisfying experience beyond anything they could ever have imagined.

Sharing the Treasure

Our Holy Father, John Paul II, and our Minister General, John Vaughn, have encouraged us to try to find ways within our charism to share the treasures of prayer made possible through the privilege of contemplative life the Church has granted us.

Poor Clares have traditionally shared their charism by extended correspondence with countless people who call, write or come to our monasteries for help in their troubles or to ask our prayerful intercession. These days are seeing an opening out which includes giving conferences or retreats in some of our houses. Each community offers such opportunities according to its possibilities. We are entering upon a further way of sharing the treasures of our contemplative life and that is through research, study, and writing.

The mandate of Vatican II, to return to our sources, has provided just the kind of prodding we needed. We're beginning to research and study the various expressions of our charism, and are uncovering the legacy left by Clares who have gone before us. Their prolific correspondence and writings include theology, spirituality, scripture, biography, autobiography, history, poetry and music.

Among the best-known of these writings are the fourteen volumes by Veronica Giuliani (d. 1727) who described the interior castle of a Poor Clare – a representation quite different from Teresa's fine Spanish mansion. She described how our castle is suspended between heaven and earth because a Poor Clare's

heart not fully on earth nor totally spiritualized. It is made of rough, unpolished stones and each stone is made up of many small crosses. Within the castle there is only one large room, and the only furnishing in the room is the naked cross. Veronica develops this theme further.

We have over two hundred outstanding women who left writings or who were exceptional models of Poor Clare spirituality. Hundreds of volumes written about, or by, these women are scattered throughout the world. We need to bring them forth. The more we can learn from the various expressions of our charism from those who went before us, the more we can protect ourselves from the kind of aberrations that have hindered us from sharing it more generously in the past.

It seems that most Clares of the Primitive Rule were never allowed to study or write. This was the interpretation given to the statement in our Rule that “the sisters who do not know how to read should not be solicitous to learn”. (Rule of St. Clare, Ch. 10) There were some courageous Clares in the Middle Ages who wrote amid opposition, or who insisted upon educating their sisters. Our senior sisters recall a certain day fifty years ago, when they were first granted unlimited access to a dictionary. We’ve come a long way but we’re still just getting started. Finding ways to share Clare’s gospel ideal of spiritual poverty could, indeed, be helpful in transforming twentieth century striving for power, possessions, prestige, and money, into the reign of God in many minds and hearts. To share the dedication to interior prayer she bequeathed to us could inspire others with the kind of prayer that does make all things possible.

As the Eighth centenary of St. Clare approaches her spirit is growing stronger as if to bless our world with the kind of new life she brought to hers. Having exposed Clare’s limited writings to the light of spiritual and mystical theology, particularly according to the Franciscan School, I have been convinced that far from leaving us bereft of inspiration, or lacking in guidance for our spiritual life, Clare has left us all we need. Her life is a treatise on the love of Christ and the experience of God, and on how to live powerfully for the Church and for the world. Perhaps Clare seems to be awakening because her daughters are awakening – searching for ways to live as vibrantly for our age as she did for hers, so that our way of life may be the joy and edification of our Order and our Church.

And, finally, I would like to offer a personal sharing. Before I became a Poor Clare, I used to ponder the preciousness of life. This was going to be my one chance at it, and I wanted to use every bit of it. I wanted a life that would enable

me to give everything I had to give. I learned about St. Francis and how he gave up everything so he could give his whole heart to the love of Christ. The day I discovered he had started a group of enclosed nuns who gave up everything so they could grow constantly in the love of God, I knew that was what I was going to do with my life.

Because of my own spontaneous response I have no trouble understanding why Clare would see a contemplative form of life as the best way to follow Francis. I'm sure I would never have come to know God as I do if I hadn't taken the initial step of letting go the possibility of other joys. And all through life I continue to understand more deeply the secrets of poverty, and why it meant so much to Clare. With St. Paul she proclaims to all of us today: I count everything as loss because of something that far exceeds it; the knowledge of my Lord Jesus Christ." (Phil 3:7-8)

Now I can understand why the greatest concern of her life was to leave others the one treasure she had found on this earth: the poverty that had given her God.

I leave you with Clare's blessing: "May the Lord always be with you and may you always be with Him." (See 2Cor 13:11; Jn 12:26; 1Th 4:17).