

CLARE: A WOMAN MOST POWERFUL

The Legend of Saint Clare of Assisi attributed to Thomas of Celano reads like a story of Jesus, and so it should. Hagiographical accounts written for the canonization of a saint followed a consistent methodology by which a person's likeness to Christ was made evident. This restricted perspective, however, tends to leave us feeling personally impoverished of the stuff of lofty states of wholeness.

Even more so do we set aside the great cloistered mystics when considering patterns for our own journey into God. Clare was one of those; a pioneer of the high places of the spirit who gave of herself totally by exposing her intimate union with God in order to light our path there. Reflections upon aspects of Clare's spiritual quest may draw us to learn from this great woman who remains one of the strongest and most beautiful characters of all time.

Since Clare was renowned for virtue even from her earliest days, we may wonder at the exuberant expressions of gratitude over her conversion displayed in her writings. But wasn't this really where life had blossomed for her, where something deep inside her had come alive? Although the word "conversion" may aptly describe her meeting with Francis and all that followed, the term "awakening" may more adequately describe the reality of the new experience of God taking hold of Clare. Much is revealed Celano's words: "The joys of heaven were opened to her...."

This profound broadening of the spiritual capacities is a deeply sensual experience involving the entire person. It is a surety irrevocably engraved upon the human faculties that had to have left Clare longing to know its Source. It resulted in an inner security that enabled her to see her direction more clearly and make a commitment to pursue it. Francis discerned these signs of the Spirit's workings within her and proceeded to instruct her concerning the tastelessness of all the world could offer her in comparison with a loving relationship of espousal union with Jesus Christ.

The same spirit that commissioned Francis to rebuild His Church ordained that Clare would maintain this Church on its course. St. Peter Damien described the apostolate entrusted to the contemplative Orders as that of a lighthouse casting forth its light while remaining in one place. Francis dearly revered a life of prayer and he carefully nurtured this seed sown in Clare's heart containing the willingness to remain hidden as the life-giving heart of the Franciscan family, the ardent desire to BE for God rather than DO for God, and the total giving of oneself in bridal love to Christ.

Yes, Clare has much to teach us, especially that freedom is not synonymous with mileage, that the spirit becomes free when it finds Truth and gives itself to that same Truth forever, and that inner peace and joy are the fruit of this oneness with God. Clare would now be free, nor would her light be hidden but, rather, submitted to the discipline of a lamp stand so that its rays would shine more clearly and steadily.

There was a modern mystic who understood the love of a person like Clare, and she wrote:

Why, when you stretched out nets to imprison me, should I have thrilled with greater joy than when you offered me wings? It is because the only element I hanker after in your gifts is the fragrance of your power over me, and the touch of your hand upon me. For what exhilarates us human creatures more than freedom, more than the glory of achievement, is the joy of finding and surrendering to a beauty greater than man; the rapture of being possessed. (Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Prayer of the Universe*, 122).

Clare learned to pray by looking deeply into Jesus. He remained ever in her thoughts. She often wept while contemplating the immeasurable love of this poor and crucified God. This was not totally uncommon for the medieval Italian temperament, but it also reveals someone accepting of her humanness, capable of intimacy, and thus ready to proceed to a wholesome development of her spiritual capacities. Clare exemplifies the important lesson that it is our senses that train us for the prayerful perceptions and intuitions of life in the spirit.

Nor did she escape our sinfulness, rather she had to struggle with her own wounds. As her inner light grew stronger, darkness was allowed equal time. Her biography reveals her fear that the intensity of her emotional involvement in prayer would cause blindness. She made her choice: "They will not be blind who see God." (Leg 19) The confidence of this reply didn't erase the effort required for someone to arrive at this point where selfishness no longer controlled her choices because she sought only God.

She also feared she would lose her intelligence and her beauty. With her answer to this temptation we are given a description of great love. "Nothing can harm one who wants only to do God's will." She had outgrown the tyranny of the ego which prevents our reaching out towards the Other within every other person. This degree of integration was painfully achieved by Clare, as it must always be. As one who has been there, she is all the more dependable a guide for the rest of us.

When we read about the prayer and mystical experiences of saints like Clare, we

usually fail to consider the fact that these episodes of discovery and resurrection had to have been preceded by the same searching we all know. But seldom do we think to ascribe a time of questioning and groping to those so privileged. The mysterious fullness Clare came to know required a place empty enough to contain it. And there were many deaths ahead of her to clear the way for the invasion of God still to come.

Her abiding sense of God's presence and her uninterrupted prayer assumed a variety of forms common to us. These included her love of the liturgy as a basis for her prayer, and the use of set forms of prayer like those Francis composed. When she received the Body of Christ or contemplated His sufferings she allowed herself to be wholly absorbed in the reality of His love. She cultivated openness to the spirit in herself and her companions by promoting an appreciation for silence and the importance of a quiet atmosphere for maintaining an attitude of prayerfulness.

All of life became holy for her and was gathered into her one Love. Hearing God praised became a cause of great joy for her. On many occasions she would remind her sisters that "for every human being they saw, and for every creature, always and in all things God must be praised." (CP #14,9)

Clare's mystical doctrine is revealed in just these few accounts of her prayer: Always, the Door to transcendent union is Jesus; always, the contemplation of the poverty, humility and unspeakable love of the Word; then, transformation into God and a taste of "the hidden joys which God Himself has waiting for those who love Him." (3rd. let)

Clare gave herself completely to Him who is Truth and came to know this same Truth in Its consummate simplicity within herself. This is the greatest accomplishment in this world and for this world: the union of the human spirit with God. The very power of the Spirit became her own in a spiritual marriage of her will with God's, and the fruit of this union was poured out beyond the walls of the cloister.

Spiritual leaders like Clare stand tall and strong throughout the ages, pointing the way for the rest of us. Through her Gospel life for the sake of the Kingdom, Clare became an "unmoving light between the universe and God" (de Chardin); a living flame of Seraphic love. The impact she had on her world was overwhelming though she never left her monastery.

To those who follow her she left her blessing for all time, and her mandate to continue in the spirit in which she had lived: "I hold you to be a co-worker with God Himself and a support for the weak and failing members of His glorious Body." (3rd. let)

Somewhere there is an ancient eastern scripture which seems to sing of Clare: "Women,

when consecrated to Truth, become most powerful daughters of God."