



St. Clare of Assisi

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Saint
Clare
of
Assisi

by

John Paul Kirkham

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Blessing of St. Clare

May Almighty God bless you.

May He look upon you
with the eyes of His mercy
and give you His peace.

May He pour forth His graces
on you abundantly;
and in heaven

may He place you among His Saints!

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Introduction

The difficulty sometimes in writing about a person who was born over eight hundred years ago, is that often what material is available has either come from unknown sources or from stories that have been passed down and have become dramatically embellished or fictionalised albeit with good intention. The Life of Saint Clare as told here is both dramatic and true. After her death the Church Authorities commissioned an official biography. The ascribed author was Thomas Celano of the Franciscan Order of Friars Minor who had previously completed the "The Life of Saint Francis of Assisi". Thomas Celano was therefore a contemporary of Clare and his writings record all the known facts using the eyewitness accounts of the time, the living voices of those who actually knew and lived with Clare. The difference in this official new biography lies in the way I have strived to tell the story chronologically, as the original medieval manuscripts tend to juxtapose certain events and have added earlier happenings later in the text. What is presented here then, is the story of the founder

of the Poor Clare's told "Franciscanly" which literally is, the simple way with Clare's own life and writings revealing her spirituality to the reader without much need of theological dissection or interpretation.

Throughout the text up to her canonisation I have chosen to call our "Great Saint" simply by her Christian name "Clare". This takes nothing of her sanctity away, but conversely draws us more clearly into her light and reveals her in a more intimate way of one who we can more easily know as a close friend.

Previously and with the support and help of several Poor Clare communities I produced and wrote a contemporary translation of Clare's own writings entitled "*Clare of Assisi, Her Life and Message*" which was published in 2005 as a paperback edition and from this came an invitation and commission from the official UK publishers to the Vatican to write a completely new biography. It took three separate trips to Assisi to gather information, explore, discover and walk in her footsteps through the beautiful Umbrian hills and

landscapes that allowed and released the inspiration to recreate Clare's story for a contemporary audience.

Final words of thanks must go to Sister Assumpta, Abbess of the Poor Clare Monastery at Arkley in Hertfordshire who allowed me unlimited access to the Monastery Library, Archive and manuscript copies and who provided help in finding hitherto very old and rarely seen material for me to research and to Sister Chiara of Jesus at St. Clare's Abbey in Darlington who shared with me her immense knowledge and insight and understanding of Clare's spirituality revealing *a true light that brightens the world*.

John Paul Kirkham

Assisi and Clare's Background

Medieval Assisi

Where exactly is Assisi? To say it is about half way between Rome and Florence is all too vague. Italy is made up of nineteen provinces or regions and Assisi lies in the very central heart of the country in the province of Umbria. The region's hilltop capital city of Perugia lies just a few short miles away across a valley to the west and is clearly visible from Assisi whilst to the south lies Spoleto and eastwards the cities of Norcia and Cascia, the birthplaces of St. Benedict and St. Rita.

Assisi like so many of its Umbrian counterparts, Todi, Gubbio, and Orvieto is situated on a plateau, commanding fine and distant panoramas. Arising from behind Assisi is the Appenine Mount Subasio that dominates the surrounding countryside with its lush soft green peaks and forests that capture the changing moods of the sun and the seasons.

Successive conquering emperors, from behind the battlements of the stark and imposing Rocca Maggiore fortress, governed Assisi.

Those who found favour where Assisi's Lords and noble families whilst the common people struggled to make their daily existence bearable by making a frugal living off the land or in the market place. A feudal system existed and it was common for neighbouring cities and towns to go to war against each other, making it dangerous to leave the confines of the city walls, as the surrounding lands were also the hunting grounds for bandits who would prey on any unsuspecting passer by. In the year 1200 there was such a mutually shared hatred with Perugia that a war broke out that lasted nine years. This feudal system would however eventually crumble and the citizens of Assisi would form their own local "*commune*" government and from amidst the shadow of depression and hostilities a great ray of hope would soon shine forth.

The Family of Clare

Clare's aristocratic and noble ancestry can be traced back to her paternal great grandfather Paolo from the house of the Counts of Scefi who owned citadels and palaces in and around Assisi.

Clare's grandfather, an only child called Offreduccio, (this is the family name), owned a large house in the upmarket and very fashionable area on the Piazza San Ruffino. To him three sons were born of whom Favarone would be Clare's father.

Favarone was a rich knight and was the master of a well-respected house; he employed many servants and was a well known figure throughout the district.

Clare's mother called Ortolana, Countess of Sterpeto was also well known and much loved by the people of Assisi, being renowned for her works of charity and adherence to living a religious life.

Ortolana spent a great deal of time travelling on pilgrimages to Rome and beyond, even as far as Jerusalem in the holy land itself; all this in a time when a journey across the local valley would have posed some great hardship and risk. The name Ortolana in Italian means "*gardener*", and she would certainly as a mother play a significant role in the cultivation of all her daughter's faith.

Favarone and Ortolana would have five children. Bosone a boy and heir who sadly died early, Penenda the first daughter, Agnes

whose baptismal name was Catherine and Beatrice were daughters number three and four. But it is now time to turn to the second and greatest daughter, that being Clare of Assisi.

Birth to Maidenhood

Giving birth in the Middle Ages was a trying experience and in 1193 with her child's imminent arrival, Ortolana felt very fearful and would often seek refuge in prayer in the Basilica of San Ruffino. Kneeling before the crucifix she prayed for a safe delivery and that all would go well in the expected childbirth. Ortolana described how in prayer she heard a voice saying: *"Do not be afraid, woman! For you will safely give birth to a light who's rays shall illuminate the whole world"* and on July 16th 1193 Clare's eyes saw the sun for the first time.

When it came to baptising the child in the same font that had witnessed the baptism of St. Francis, Ortolana remembered God's comforting words and put forward the name *Chiara*, Clare which signifies light or to illuminate, hoping that this brightness foretold might in some way fulfil the promises of God's will.

Ortolana brought up her child well and instructed Clare in the faith and taught her how to pray. Clare's mother was certainly the guiding influence in the ways of God and the paths of virtue and her own pious life was a perfect example for a young girl to follow. Clare's aunt, Bona Guelfuccio a very devout widow became her governess and confidant and quickly gained a deep insight into Clare's true spiritual nature and the aunt would give Clare as much encouragement and help as was possible.

Assisi had its poor quarter and many ordinary people were starving and living in squalid conditions. Clare even as a young girl would make sacrifices for God secretly by denying herself the delicacies of the household meals and with the help of one of her aunts daughters would send her own portions to the poor orphans and those who were in more need, indicating an early sign of her sanctity.

Clare loved to pray and would hide herself in the rooms of the house for hours on end in conversation with God. Not having a set of prayer beads, Clare would use a handful of tiny pebbles to

count the "Our Fathers" and direct her prayers to the Lord. Immersed in a Divine Love, Clare gradually came to reject all worldly and earthly goods and regarded them as worthless things. Even under her softly tailored and rich dress garments she would wear a hair shirt. Her outward appearance would be as normal but internally she was wearing Christ already.

At the end of the twelfth century there was an uprising and most of the noble families moved to the rival city of Perugia. Perugia may have seemed a safer place and even Favarone was forced into exile and took the whole family with him. It was in Perugia that Clare would form a lifelong friendship with two girls, Filippa and Benvenuta who later would become amongst the first to follow Clare into religious life. The war between Assisi and Perugia would last another three years and then the temporary exile was over and Clare would be back home in her beloved Assisi.

Clare was now seventeen and had blossomed into a picture of great beauty. The family was respected and wealthy and her father had plans of a great wedding and therefore sought to contract a

marriage with a suitor of aristocratic and admirable virtues. There was certainly no shortage of prospective husband's who were noble lords themselves, but Clare would hear nothing of it, she not only refused, she would not even entertain any talk of weddings or marriage. This proved to be a great annoyance to her father and uncles and when questioned further, Clare told them, that all she wished to do was to preserve herself as chaste and commend her virginity to the Lord.

Clare's Call to Serve God

Clare, Francis and Conversion

Assisi already had its own patron saint, being that of St. Rufinus (San Ruffino) who was an early Christian bishop martyred for his faith. The large basilica dedicated to him, which contains his tomb and relics, had long been established in the upper part of the city and this same city was now about to witness the dramatic appearance of not only one, but two of the churches greatest saints.

Francis Bernardone was born in Assisi in 1182 and was the senior of Clare by eleven years. Like Clare, his family was well known and his father was one of the cities richest merchants. Francis as a young man was the life and soul of the frequent banquets and parties that he hosted and he was a man who craved adventure and dreamt of being a great knight of arms.

One day he left Assisi, waved and cheered off by the multitudes, dressed in the finest and most expensive armour and headed southwards towards Rome. This adventure was short lived and no

sooner had he left than he had returned in just a few short days, a changed and different person. He took to wearing rags and went wandering amongst the hills and countryside, living in a cave not far from the church ruins of San Damiano.

In 1206 whilst praying before the large crucifix in the crumbling church, Francis heard God's call, the voice that asked him to rebuild his Church and from that moment Francis would live the Gospel to the exact word; he would renounce everything and devote himself to God and to poverty, his conversion was completed. He also went as far in predicting that in the not so distant future *"the coming of a community of "Poor Ladies"*.

News about his behaviour spread and many thought him an eccentric madman as he and his disciples begged from door to door and town-to-town for scraps to eat, but even so there were still a few who could discern a true holiness in how he acted, and Clare as a young teenager would most certainly have known about by news and word, this intriguing and faithful servant of God.

In 1209 Francis' Rule for his Order of Friars Minor received verbal approval from Pope Innocent III and he took to the road preaching. From the pulpit of San Ruffino in Assisi, his sermons were simple yet powerful and focussed on the Gospel and he proclaimed: "*that poverty, which was in possessing nothing was to gain everything, in God*". He had a small gang of followers, the first twelve "Brothers" of the Franciscan Order that banded together in small makeshift huts next to the small Church of St. Mary, known as the Porziuncula, at the foot of the hill of Assisi. Clare was inspired by this new radical way of life and with her friends she sought out this holy man, the founder of this new order who would become her spiritual guide and new father in faith.

There does not seem to be an exact moment of time that can be traced to Clare's conversion, in fact the journey it seems was already predestined from her mother's womb. On the return from Perugia, Clare continued to assist the poor and hungry and spent the rest of her time offering prayers and suffering penance for the love of the crucified Lord.

Clare withdrew from the outside world and her rooms at home would be her secluded cloisters; Clare's life of prayerful solitude had begun. The only subject that she would converse about at home to family members, relatives and visitors was that of God. News of Clare's piety and devotion to Jesus spread throughout Assisi and it would just be a matter of time before this maiden's fame to holiness would reach the ears of Francis himself.

At first however it was Clare who had heard about Francis and she desired to see and hear him. Francis' mission was to inform all people of the folly of the world and to win souls for God's Kingdom. The words that spoke to him came directly from God as he wandered in the wilderness; after praying he had randomly opened the Bible at Matthew's Gospel; *Jesus said, "If you wish to be perfect, go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me"* (Matthew 19:21). This was the pillar of the Good News that he preached to all who would listen to him. This was his way, his ideal.

Francis called on the House of Offreduccio and Clare would, with a companion chaperone frequently visit him to listen to the way he seemed to make following Jesus the completely natural thing to do. Clare being a careful girl would only leave the family home accompanied by her faithful friends or with her trusted Aunt Bona Guelfuccio.

Francis would reveal to her the emptiness of all worldly hopes and dreams. He told her what Jesus said: *“Take nothing for the journey: neither staff, nor haversack, nor bread, nor money; and let none of you take a spare tunic (Luke 9:3).* This hardship, he said, could be rewarded by a vision of the eternal joys that lay ahead, and this caused her heart to ache with such a yearning to become a bride of the heavenly King. She despised all vanity and desired to consecrate her body and soul to God alone. Over the next two years, Francis would take Clare under his guidance to new levels of spiritual awareness. When Francis spoke to her it was with such fervour of the love of Jesus; and he exhorted that Clare should focus her whole life, body and soul towards the love of Christ, to

desire nothing and wish for nothing else; and to let nothing else please or delight, other than that of the Creator, Redeemer and Saviour, the only true God. God had revealed to her the way: *“If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross every day and follow me” (Luke 9:23).*

The seal was now set, the path Francis had chosen to follow would become the road for Clare as well, which would mean renouncing her good life and choosing poverty. All that was needed would be to find or discern a way to enable Clare to fulfil God’s own plan for her.

Clare’s flight from home

Clare had asked Francis for help in finding a way to fulfil her vocation and it is understood that Bishop Guido of Assisi who was a most faithful counsellor and devoted friend of Francis was sought out to approve and advise the way.

On the day before Palm Sunday in 1212 Clare visited Francis and a dramatically tense plan was carefully put into place to remove her from the ills of the world. On March 18th, Palm Sunday, Clare went

to Mass as normal at the Basilica of San Ruffino along with all the young girls, dressed in her finest gown. When it came to the point in the celebration when all the girls went up to the altar to receive their palms or olive branches, Clare remained transfixed to her seat. All eyes in the cathedral gazed towards her, silence everywhere, an atmosphere of expectancy even suspense. What happened is that Bishop Guido himself stepped down from the sanctuary and walked towards Clare and gave her a palm. Clare took this as a sign that the time had now come and whatever was to happen would be directed by God's own hand.

The Lenten twilight turned to darkness and Clare although nervous put her plan into action. It would have been foolish to leave through the front door of the house as this led directly onto the main square and there would have still been those about who could recognise her or sound the alarm. There was a side door exit but this was barred and sealed up with a mass of wooden beams and stones. Clare was given the miraculous strength to remove and overcome this first obstacle in her path and with the side door

now opened, Clare aided by her cousin Pacifica set foot secretly out into the night. With the silhouette of Assisi's grand basilica behind them they fled first through the quiet side streets then down into the forested hillside. Past midnight with only the moonlight as their guide they descended to the foot of the valley where Francis and his "brothers" were waiting at the little Church of St. Mary of the Porziuncula, keeping a night vigil at the altar with lighted torches. As soon as they arrived Clare submitted to the tonsure, that of having her long blonde tresses of hair shorn from the crown of her head, and disposing of her worldly clothes Francis attired her in the poor robe of a habit. Thus was born that night in the shadow of Our Blessed Lady's sanctuary, the threefold Franciscan Order. After prostrating herself before the Altar of the Blessed Virgin, Francis then escorted Clare to the safety of the Benedictine monastery of San Paolo of the Abbesses in Bastia, which is just two miles away from Assisi.

It didn't take very long for Clare's family to discover what had happened and her present whereabouts. They were filled with

grief and condemned the act as a betrayal. The entire extended family rushed to San Paolo to plead with their daughter to return home. They would have employed methods of violence to retrieve her but the monastery as all holy places was subject to the law and rule of asylum. The family however refused to give up and pleaded with her to come home to be restored to the good life she was used to. When all reasoning failed they resorted back to verbal abuse and threats. At this point, Clare, holding the altar cloths publicly removed her veil barring her shaved head had the last word and the family finally accepted that nothing would deter her from serving Christ.

A few days later when things had quietened down Clare transferred to another Benedictine monastery, that of San Angelo di Pansa on the slopes of Mount Subasio to the east of Assisi. Clare had only been with this new community for a short time when another sensational and climatic family event broke out.

It had taken just sixteen days for Clare's sister Agnes to decide that she also wanted to join Clare and follow in the Lord's footsteps.

This came as no surprise to Clare as she had been praying continually that Agnes would come to join her. After losing one daughter, Favarone could not contain his anger any longer and this time what seemed like an army set off to bring back Agnes at any cost. When the party arrived at San Angelo di Pansa they deemed to hide their rage by a cunning deceit to gain access to the convent. Having long since given up any hope of persuading Clare, their attention turned to Agnes. Agnes' refusal was too much and one of the knights' brutally assaulted Agnes with punches and kicks and seizing her dragged her off by the hair. The assailants lifted her up and carried her away and the undignified sight continued down the hill slopes. Agnes crying out to Clare and to God for help had her garments roughly torn to pieces and her hair was pulled out by the handful. Clare had fallen on her knees before God and pleaded for the release of Agnes. Suddenly the body of Agnes became so heavy that the party could not carry her over the small river and when laid on the ground it was found that even after calling for extra hands from the workers in the

vineyards her weight was so much that she remained rooted to the floor. Mocking this miracle and after further insulting remarks her uncle drew his sword to stab her at which point his hand was gripped with a most intense pain which would linger on for a long time after this murderous attempt. Clare now appeared and begged for her half dead sister to be released into her care. Once again realising any more attempts would be futile they reluctantly walked away leaving the two jubilant sisters to their own means and God's destiny. In this way Agnes became the first follower of Clare's soon to be founded community, in a humble dwelling place not far away, in the church that Francis had restored and built with his own hands.

San Damiano: The Early Years

A Contemplative and Enclosed Life

The Church and monastery of San Damiano is a short walk down a steep incline just outside the eastern wall of Assisi. On the advice of Francis, Clare having already given her dowry to the poor at San Angelo moved into in 1212 this bare and poor abode that would be her home for the last forty two years of her life. Confined to her tiny cell, cloisters, garden and chapel, Clare withdrew from the world outside and this self-imposed solitude became her heavenly nest on earth and would be her place of silence, prayer, penance and poverty with a firm dedication of charity to look after all who wished to follow this strict form of religious life. Her mission was to pray and win souls for her beloved Lord. This order that was unique in many ways became known initially as the "Poor Ladies" of the Order of San Damiano (The Damianites). Very soon the fame and sanctity of Clare spread throughout the whole of the region and it wasn't long before the community of two (Clare and her sister Agnes) increased.

First came two of Clare's close childhood friends, Benvenuta from Perugia and Pacifica. Shortly after, many rich young maidens, inspired by Clare's holiness gave up all they had as well and sought to follow and dedicate their lives to Christ. Mothers encouraged daughters, daughters encouraged their mothers, sisters extolled sisters, and nieces and aunts came to join the monastery. Outside the walls attitudes began to change; men swelled the ranks of Francis' First Order of Brothers and married couples began to explore ways of adopting a way of life in the home without being bound by monastic rules, which was in many ways an early form of what was to become much later, the founding of the Third Franciscan Order (The Tertiary) for the laity. Clare although shut away was now starting to fulfil the prophesy and enlighten the world from within.

As many girls and women found conversion, Clare would send out sisters to found new convents and monasteries scattered not only throughout Italy but in neighbouring countries as well and in her own lifetime Clare would see the establishment of some one

hundred and fifty houses of the Order. Many now chose willingly and unimpeded to follow this way of life, which was a call to live simply, but more than that, it was a call to live the Gospel.

The Privilege of Poverty

Three years of religious life had passed and Clare wanted to remain a humble servant sister in holy humility and she would rather have preferred to be a willing daughter of Christ and serve the other sisters rather than to have any place of authority and it was only in obedience to Francis whom the sisters called their “holy father” and the local Bishop that Clare after declining the office reluctantly took the title of Abbess, a position she would hold until death.

Even so, as abbess, Clare never shirked any responsibility; she would wash the hands of the sisters, serve the meals and waited on them at table. Clare rarely gave orders, preferring to do any extra work herself. Humility is regarded as the greatest of virtues and Clare would willingly tend to the sick sisters by washing them and their toilet-soiled clothing never shrinking away from the

smell or illnesses. When any lay sister arrived at the monastery from outside Clare on bended knees would immediately clean and dry their feet. During the cold and freezing winter nights, Clare would remain awake tending the sleeping sisters beds by making sure they were always covered by a blanket keeping out the icy drafts of air. Clare as abbess took full responsibility for the spiritual and moral guidance of her sisters by setting them an example of a single-minded love of God through devotion to prayer and acts of sisterly charity.

To live the Gospel meant living without any means whatsoever. All temporal goods had been rejected and the community would accept nothing of monetary value and no possessions; instead they would rely on the works of their own hands.

This new women's Order was both revolutionary and unique in the history of the church up until that point in the way it practiced Christ's values. Francis in 1215 wrote down a basic set of his own Franciscan rules which the "Poor Ladies" followed, those of *doing penance, following the Gospel, to live in the highest degree of poverty, to*

practice Christian love and to remain faithful and submissive to the one Holy Catholic Church. The sisters embraced all these ideals, but it was compassion and poverty that Clare is most remembered for.

In the same year (1215) Clare petitioned Pope Innocent III. Clare wished to possess nothing only that of the Lord Christ and forbade her sisters to possess anything at all. Clare wanted the title of her order to include the word "Poor" and so asked the Holy Father for "The Privilege of Poverty". The Pontiff congratulated Clare on her great fervour and declared that no such request or privilege had ever been requested before from the Holy See. The fourth Lateran Council had decided not to accept any new rules and up until this time, the Rule of St. Benedict was the norm followed and for any monastery or convent not to actually own any property was unheard of. However, the enlightened and inspired Pope granted this unique privilege to the extent that he wrote the opening lines of the document himself.

Much later in 1228 Pope Gregory IX tried to dispense of her ideals and persuade Clare who he loved with great affection to at least

consent to have some possessions, as he feared that they were living in such dangerous times and may need help in the future. He went as far as offering some goods of his own. Clare true to her way of life resisted politely and so Pope Gregory IX re-confirmed "The Privilege of Poverty". At the same time and given to Clare's insistence, a further petition to extend the Rule of Poverty to all the other monasteries of the Order was also granted by the Pope.

Clare had therefore renewed her vows to follow Christ alone and to acquire nothing and was more happy to receive small morsels of bread that the lay Franciscan brothers had begged from the streets for them than to receive a whole loaf. Thus eating the tiny crumbs fulfilled her idea of poverty and made her feel far more comfortable.

Miracles of Bread and Oil

From the Poor Ladies early formation, Francis and his Order had agreed to look after their spiritual needs and the offer of any assistance was always available. Francis himself would visit from time to time but in the main he had appointed a chaplain, a priest

and two Questors (lay brothers) to look after the sisters requirements. The two lay brothers were commissioned to collect alms for the Poor ladies and there was a small hospice close to the monastery of San Damiano that was always inhabited by a small group of Friars. It was these same Friars who would beg for food to sustain the community of sisters' physical needs.

One day, it happened that only one single loaf of bread could be found in the monastery. Mealtime was close approaching and all of the sisters who were gathering in the refectory were more hungry than usual. Clare told the sister in charge of the kitchen to divide the loaf in half, one for the Friars and to retain one half for themselves. Clare then asked the sister to cut fifty slices out of the remaining half a loaf and then deliver the portions to the table. The sister told Clare that a special miracle of Christ would be needed to multiply that small piece of bread into fifty portions. The holy Abbess replied *"Do what I say and trust in me"*. The sister went hastily away to comply with the request. Mother Clare then cast herself at the feet of Jesus her beloved Spouse and sent up her

prayers on behalf of her daughters. While the sister was cutting the bread, by divine intervention the amount increased miraculously and there was more than enough to eat for the whole community.

Likewise at another time the supply of olive oil that was used in the preparation of food had completely run out. The olive oil because of its healthy properties was always given to those sisters who were sick. Clare took the earthenware oil jar, washed and dried it by hand and then placed the empty vessel on the outside wall by the gate of the monastery. This was so that the Brother could take it on his errand to seek the sustaining oil. The Lay Brother was so devoted and anxious to help with their needs that spying the single vessel lying on the wall in the shade he ran quickly to fetch it. Once again through the prayers of Clare, God had filled the jar with oil and the services of the brother were not needed on that particular day. The brother at first thought the sisters had been playing a trick on him, then on realising what had happened exclaimed with great joy that "*the jar was full*".

By this time the numbers of the ranks of the Order were increasing far and wide and as early as 1219 Clare had sent her own Sister Agnes with title Abbess to look after the monastery of Monticello near Florence. Mature ladies who had become widows wished to join and those princesses of royal birth in other nations found peace in these enclosures of the Lord and by the end of the 1220s there were first foundations of these "Damianites" at Rheims in France and also in Spain.

Clare's own mother Ortolana on becoming a widow sold all her earthly possessions and property, distributed all of the money amongst the poor and clothed in the habit by Francis himself joined San Damiano. Not long after, Clare's sister Beatrice on reaching the age of eighteen took her vows with the "new family" and on the advice of Clare would establish several new monasteries throughout Italy.

Incidents of Francis in relation to Clare

Not long after Francis had given Clare and the "Order of Poor Ladies" his simple Rule, Francis sought in humility the wisdom of

Clare with regards to his own ministry. He felt drawn also to the contemplative life and had been living for some time the life of a hermit. Clare, who thought herself unworthy of such a task, nevertheless took to prayer and God's answer was that Francis should give up his solitude and to go out once more and continue to proclaim the Gospel.

The only time Clare left San Damiano in all of forty-two years was at the invitation of Francis at her insistence to have a simple meal and "break bread" with him. This meal took place at St. Mary of the Angels, the small Church, The Porziuncula, at the foot of Assisi where all those years ago Clare had received her poor habit. Clare took with her a sister to accompany her on this short journey. Throughout the meal, Francis, Clare and all of the companions were so rapt in a heavenly ecstasy that it seemed to all the locals that a great fire was illuminating the night sky, rising from within the church. The inhabitants of Assisi carrying water all rushed to save the church and their woods and olive trees from being burnt to destruction but discovered on arrival that it was the dinner

party itself that was aglow with a “Divine Fire” fuelled by the flames of “Divine love”.

In 1224 Francis received the Holy Stigmata, the five wounds of the crucified Lord in his hands, feet and side. For two years Francis would be brought to Clare who looked after his intense sufferings, bandaging his wounds and wiping up the blood and making sandals for his feet that bore the nails that made even standing upright such a painful ordeal.

Francis knew that “*Sister bodily death*” was calling him, so he asked to be near the Church of San Damiano that he had built himself and to see Clare and the sisters. He remained for all this time in the precincts of the monastery living in a small hut built for him out of mud and straw and it was during these days that saw the onset of Clare’s own bodily pains and infirmities that would last until the end of her own life. During this period Francis composed not only his famous “*Canticle of the Sun*” but also another Song, written for his beloved sisters. It is first worth recalling this beautiful canticle

of the sun which in many ways has become a twenty first century ecological and environmental acclamation:

The Canticle of the Sun

Most High, all-powerful, all-good Lord, All praise is Yours,

all glory, all honour and all blessings.

To you alone, Most High, do they belong, and no mortal lips are worthy

to pronounce Your Name.

Praised be You my Lord with all Your creatures,

especially Brother Sun, who is the day through whom You give us light.

And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendour,

Of You Most High, he bears the likeness.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,

in the heavens you have made them bright, precious and fair.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air,

and fair and stormy, all weather's moods,

by which You cherish all that You have made.

Praised be You my Lord through Sister Water,

so useful, humble, precious and pure.

*Praised be You my Lord through Brother Fire,
through whom You light the night and he is beautiful and playful and
robust and strong.*

*Praised be You my Lord through our Sister, Mother Earth
who sustains and governs us,
producing varied fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.*

*Praise be You my Lord through those who grant pardon for love of You
and bear sickness and trial.*

*Blessed are those who endure in peace, by You Most High, they will be
crowned.*

*Praised be You, my Lord through Sister Death,
from whom no-one living can escape.*

Woe to those who die in mortal sin!

Blessed are they She finds doing Your Will.

*No second death can do them harm. Praise and bless my Lord and give
Him thanks, and serve Him with great humility.*

The Song Saint Francis wrote for The Poor Clare's

Listen, Little Poor Ladies, whom the Lord has called

who have come together from all parts of the world;

Live in loyal devotion to one another, so that you die, in obedience.

Do not look to the life outside;

because the life of the Holy Spirit is better.

In great love, I beg you to use what God has given you for your needs, to

use with wise discretion.

That all those of you who are afflicted with sickness and all who care for

them, that you may bear all this in peace.

For you will see how precious are such burdens, because each of you will

be crowned queen in heaven with the Virgin Mary.

Francis' last few days were spent in the Porziuncula dictating spiritual letters and for Clare he wrote for them his last piece of counsel:

St. Francis' Last Will written for Clare and her sisters

"I, Brother Francis, want to follow the life and poverty of Our Most High Lord Jesus Christ and of His Most Holy Mother and to persevere in this to the end. And I beg you, my ladies, and advise you always, that you live in this most holy way of life and poverty. And guard yourselves very much, in case by the teachings or advice of anyone else you depart from this way of life".

And on October 3rd 1226 an hour after sunset he died.

Clare had one final request of Francis, to see him just one last time.

This was granted and the funeral procession took a detour on its journey to Assisi via San Damiano and his body was laid close to the choir grille window. Clare being ill allowed herself to be carried to the small opening so that she could kiss the visible sacred and stigmatic wound in Francis' hand and say farewell.

From this point onwards, Clare who was known by all as *"The*

Little Plant" of St. Francis would blossom to new heights; her branches extended, Clare would meditate for long hours on the "original poverty" of the pooriness of the infant Jesus, the Babe of Bethlehem, wrapped in the poverty of the poor manger. This and much of what we know of the inner life of Clare was to be beautifully revealed by her own hand in her famous and preserved writings.

The Spirituality of Clare

Her Letters

The tranquillity and peace of San Damiano must have been an ideal setting for putting quill to parchment. As we have just previously recounted, Francis taking it upon himself to rest and recuperate as best he could during his prolonged agony there, took some time out to compose his famous Canticles, inspired by the landscape, the natural elements and the wildlife.

In Cologne, Germany, there lived a very holy young girl called Ermentrude who led a virtuous life. After her parents died she prayed and asked God what her vocation should be. By divine will and advice from her Dominican priest she set off on a journey to seek out a community of virgins. After many days travelling she ended up in Belgium in the delightful city of Bruges. Feeling that this was her journeys end, Ermentrude found favour with the cities inhabitants and many other young girls came to join her makeshift community and very quickly Ermentrude found herself

in charge of an ever-growing group of new, pure, Disciples of Christ.

Not having or living by any religious Rule, Ermentrude prayed for guidance and heard God say, "*Take for your model, the virgin of Assisi*". It was to this response that Ermentrude wrote to Clare asking for her advice.

It would have been very easy for Clare to take over and despatch an Abbess to Bruges to oversee the development of this new community, but Clare, the humble handmaid, recognised that this new flock would be best served from within and offered her a beautiful letter with some simple yet profound words. Clare's letters and all her other writings were written from deep within her heart, either to individuals or for her own community of sisters, yet as we examine them more closely, it as though they could have been addressed to anyone, to all, or even to ourselves in our contemporary world.

The faithfulness of Clare was a great virtue and being "*faithful to Him*", Jesus would, with the daily labours of this world lead to that

"Crown of Everlasting Life". What Clare promises for all is really quite uncomplicated; dedicate your life, your work, your recreation to God all in humility and *"He will repay you"*, and *"the reward will be eternal"*.

Clare would spend long hours *"meditating on the mysteries of the cross and The Passion of the Lord and the anguish of Mary standing beneath the Cross"* and asks us to do the same. We are reminded to be *"vigilant"* and beware of deceit in its many forms, to close our eyes and ears to flattery and temptations of the world and it is in prayer, *"praying for one another's burdens that we fulfil Christ's laws"*.

Clare's letter to Ermentrude so filled her heart with joy and encouragement that the Rule that was in place at San Damiano was introduced and faithfully followed. Later when Clare had passed away, Ermentrude travelled to Rome to ask the Pope for approval to extend the Order throughout Belgium and into the northern provinces of France so establishing even more monasteries.

It is hard to imagine today the importance of the art of letter writing. We barely have the time to sit and gather our thoughts and any advice we wish to offer our families and friends seems to be motivated by exterior motives rather than those from within.

In the decade of 1230 Clare wrote her first three letters to Agnes of Prague who too, at a later date would be elevated to the sainthood.

It is probable that many letters passed back and forth between these two saints and there would have been great lengths of time between the writing and receiving of such letters as the delivery of any post would have been entrusted to the safe keeping of a priest or friar who would have had to undertake a long hard journey, most likely by foot and only then, when an opportunity arose.

Agnes was born in Prague in 1200 and was the princess daughter of the King of Bohemia. From an early age Agnes was educated in a monastery by St. Hedwig and derived more pleasure from reading the life of saints than learning about how to fulfil her royal duties. As advances and offers of marriage from kings and princes came forth, Agnes who longed for a life of prayer and solitude

turned to God in secret to consecrate her pure body to Him alone. Pope Gregory IX was called upon to intervene in the situation and Agnes under Papal protection finally became free to be admitted to the monastery that she had already founded, the “Daughters of St. Clare” in the city of Prague along with a Franciscan Church and hospital. This enclosure like Clare’s would be her home until her death in her eightieth year.

Clare’s letters to Agnes revealed the immense depth of love that stirred in her heart, the love of Christ the Lord and for Clare, poverty, of which she mentions often, *“I possess that which I most desire under heaven”*. Poverty is the treasure that Clare desired most and it is in this possession that she finds her great joy.

Clare explained that it was Jesus himself who was *“despised, needy and poor in this world”* and that those who are poor themselves can become *“rich in Him by possessing the Kingdom of Heaven”* and that one *“cannot serve both God and money”*. Clare sought to store up a greater treasure in heaven and knew that eternal glory awaited those who *“embraced her” (poverty)*. Once again Clare with her eyes

fixed on the poor and crucified Christ offered everything to God the Father in union with Jesus, to *“Love Him who gave Himself totally out of love for you”*. In her life and letters, Clare and her sisters were sensitive to the daily needs of each person and took upon themselves the burdens, difficulties and sufferings of humanity.

Clare as a handmaid of the Lord closely followed and was also united to Mary, Mother of Christ in whom she asks us to love, *“to cling to His most sweet Mother Mary”* as it was Mary who offered her own virgin body to God and through the power of the Holy Spirit was enabled to *“carry Jesus in the tiny enclosure of her sacred womb”*.

Clare’s fourth and final known letter to Agnes was written many years later in 1252 during the last months of Clare’s life and although more personal and reflective, it loses none of its dazzling brightness. Clare tells us of the great joy that we receive in participating in the Eucharist *“Happy, indeed, is the one permitted to share in this sacred banquet”*. Clare uses the word “joy” a lot and joy becomes an antidote and shield against darkness and pain. *“The*

poverty of the child Jesus in the manger” and the poverty of the cross and in suffering this poverty Clare was drawn deeper into union with Him and this is the inspiration of Clare’s devotion.

We are told of Jesus’ great generosity, the promise of the resurrection, *“Whose fragrance will revive the dead, and whose glorious vision will bless all the citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem, because the vision of Him is the splendour of everlasting glory ”* and Clare very poetically uses the image of the reflective love of Christ as Christ Himself being a mirror without tarnish that we can see in him the reflection of ourselves and we are asked to *“Look into this mirror every day”*.

The Rule for the Order of Poor Clare’s

For most of the time in San Damiano, the Poor Clare’s had lived by the Rule or “Form of Life” that Francis had taught them with some new additions put in place by two successive Popes. As many new monasteries started to flourish in places near and far, Clare knew that she would have to write her own Rule for her Order that could be strictly followed. Clare therefore became the first woman

in the history of the Church to compose a Religious Rule. The Rule was written over a five-year period from 1247 onwards and its twelve chapters became a definitive Franciscan way of life. The first chapter states from the outset that the primary values are *“to observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, by living in obedience, without anything (or property) of one’s own, and in chastity”*.

The ways of Jesus, which were the beloved ideals of Francis and were those that he established, were clearly to be put into practice and the sisters would *“Console the afflicted”*, *“serve all those who were ill”* and they would embrace the most absolute holy poverty *“not being able to receive, or to have any possessions”*.

The Rule was written in a very direct and concise manner throughout and covers all the aspects of what a sister’s vocation both involves and requires and concludes with her re-affirmation to *“always observe the poverty and humility of our Lord Jesus Christ and of his Holy Mother and the Holy Gospel”*.

Clare in her Rule offers an example of holiness, nourished by prayer that leads to a contemplation of the very face of God. The

opening of the heart to the Holy Spirit transforms the whole person to love and peace, in thought and deeds and the same vocation becomes a shining witness to those in the world.

Clare's own Testament, Prayers and Blessing

When Francis died, Clare remained in this world a further twenty-seven years and during this time became the custodian and defender of Francis' example, principles and teachings. Right at the end of her life Clare dictated what we would call a "Last Will and Testament". Her Testament was recorded "*In the name of the Lord*" for which she gave "*Thanks to God*". Much of what is recorded talks of Our Father's merciful love and kindness and Clare was convinced of the efficacy of ones own reciprocal love in a community of people and said "*Love one another with the charity of Christ, and let the love which you have in your hearts be shown outwardly by your deeds*".

There is also attributed to Clare the composition of the prayer verbally recited each day by her with much fervour and devotion

in “honour of the five wounds of our Lord” when Clare would fix her eyes on the poor and crucified Christ.

The famous Blessing of St. Clare given to her sisters that many are familiar with today is actually a very much shorter version or summary of the original that has been adapted in various ways for more general or universal uses.

And further lines from our saint’s prayer of blessing:

“I bless you during my life and after my death. I leave you all the blessings that I can give you, and I implore them from God Who lives and reigns world without end. Amen” assures us also of Clare’s intercessions promised to us from heaven after she had died.

San Damiano: The Later Years

Penance, Fasting and Prayer

The whole of Clare's life was filled with penance, prayer and fasting offered up to her Saviour. Her form of penance of self-mortification was very austere and by the standards of today may seem extreme in the very least. The habit she wore was coarse and rough and was worn as a covering only, and did little to keep her body warm. Clare had no use at all for shoes of any kind and her feet always remained bare. Under her habit a hair shirt was worn, sometimes even preferring one made up of sharp and prickly pigs bristles. The ground served as Clare's bed with a layer of a vines and a wooden block for a pillow. As her body weakened over time Clare would allow her head a little straw and only much later in obedience to Francis would she succumb to using a straw filled pillow.

So rigorous was her fasting and abstinence that only supernatural forces it seemed kept her alive. During the long Lenten periods (this also included most of November and December, the Lent of

St. Martin), Clare would take nothing at all on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and on the other days would consume only bread and water with a little wine on Sunday's. Over the years such fasting deprived her body of strength and allowed infirmities to set in and eventually, commanded by both Francis and the Bishop, Clare was ordered to eat at least one and a half ounces of bread each day.

What Clare deliberately lacked in physical nourishment and sustenance was made up by her contemplative acts of prayer and divine praises to God. Her gaze transfixed to heaven allowed her to receive showers of Divine Graces. After Compline (night prayer) when all the other sisters had retired to their cells, Clare would continue watching through out the night in prayer, often prostrate on the floor weeping floods of tears at the feet of Christ. It was one such night that the devil attacked her taking the form of a small child. He warned her that so much crying would make her go blind to which she replied "*Those will not be blind who shall see God*". The dark angel temporarily disappeared only to return later just

after midnight telling her that all this weeping would make her brain go soft and that it would ooze through and deform her nose. Clare replied, “ *They who serve the Lord need be afraid of nothing*” to which the devil instantly vanished.

On returning from these prolonged vigils, the community noted such joy and happiness that they would later testify during the canonisation process that “*Her face was radiant when she came back from prayers more beautiful than the sun*”.

Being the last to sleep each night, Clare also made it her duty to rise first every morning, to light the lanterns and prepare Morning Prayer showing such Spirit filled charity and love to her sisters. Clare had another great love as well, that of the Most Holy Eucharist.

The Power of the Eucharist

Clare lived on that pure Bread, the Bread of Heaven that was the real Body of Jesus Christ. Today it may seem strange but according to the custom of the time, Clare could only receive Holy Communion (The Eucharist) seven times a year. It is also worth

remembering that Francis by his own wish was never ordained to the priesthood and remaining a deacon would therefore never have been able to Celebrate a Mass at San Damiano or anywhere else.

Our late great Pope John Paul II called Clare a *“eucharist, because from behind the enclosure, she raised up a continual thanksgiving to God in her prayer, praise, love and sacrifice, accepting everything and offering all to God in union with The Son Jesus”*. Clare is often pictured in her iconography standing and holding aloft a monstrance (the sacred vessel that holds the Blessed Sacrament) on the monastery walls defending her flock. In reality this event didn't happen as pictorially portrayed but the truth of the situation is just as powerful.

In September 1240, Emperor Frederick II of Germany who also titled himself the “King” of Naples and Sicily having been excommunicated on more than one occasion began ransacking those parts of Italy that were in close alliance with the Pope. In his anti papal crusade he employed an army of lawless Saracens;

Umbria and Assisi being known centres of Christian holiness were one of his main targets of war. The army reached the gates of Assisi and shortly after, had surrounded the monastery walls of San Damiano. The outer walls were breached and the bloodthirsty Saracens had penetrated the confines of the cloisters. The sisters ran weeping and in fear to their holy mother Clare who was very ill at this time. Clare told her daughters *"Do not be afraid, for if the Lord is with us, the enemy cannot harm us"*. The sisters led Clare downstairs to the Blessed Sacrament by which time the soldiers were trying to break down the refectory door to gain access to the inner sanctum. Clare took the silver pyx encased in ivory that contained the Blessed Sacrament and placed it between themselves and the enemy at the refectory door. Clare prostrated herself and with tears pleaded in prayer to God for her family to be defended and delivered from the hands of the invading pagans. Immediately a child's voice was heard by all emanating from the box containing the real presence of Jesus, *"I will protect you always"*. Clare also asked that Assisi be defended and the reply came *"The*

city will be troubled, but shall be defended by My protection and your intercession". Placing their trust in the Lord, the hordes of Saracens mysteriously retreated and disappeared overpowered by Clare's prayers.

In the following year 1241 the army Captain Vitalis of Aversa led the Imperial troops against Assisi. The city was besieged and under a menacing threat of none withdrawal, the army prepared for attack. Clare loved dearly her Assisi and with her sisters covered their heads with ashes and pleaded for its liberation. The next morning with Gods merciful intervention the enemy was beaten back never to return again.

The powers of her prayers by this time were well known. To defeat armies was a wonder but also to conquer that other army, the army of darkness became a marvel. A holy woman from Pisa came to visit Clare to give thanks that through Clare's intercession, five demons had been cast out. On leaving the possessed body the evil spirits confessed that the saints prayers had fearfully tortured them.

First as Bishop then as Cardinal, Hugolino who later would become Pope Gregory IX also had great faith in Clare's prayers and would often recommend himself to her and through Clare's assistance would always benefit when he found himself in need. Such was her deep devotion to the Blessed Sacrament that when a crisis occurred her natural response was to turn to the real presence of Jesus and His immediate help was always given.

The Sign of the Cross

The six-foot high Crucifix suspended over the monastery altar at San Damiano is the known as Saint Damian's Cross and is also the adopted Cross of the Franciscan Order. The cross is unusual as it is a painted icon in the Syrian style rather than the more common plain cross with the nailed corpus of Christ. This was the very same Cross that spoke to Francis and drew Clare into the great intimacy and understanding of God. Christ gazes out to the whole world, eyes wide open, crucified, yet not appearing sad or in pain. He welcomes those that look on Him and to all who do He expresses the complete Paschal Mystery: His death, resurrection

and ascension and there is a certain luminosity that shines out from the transfigured colours left by the unknown 12th century artist.

Clare's adoration for the crucified Jesus was well rewarded. For being so deeply inflamed with such a great love for the mystery of the cross, she was given the gift of performing miracles by simply making the Sign of the Cross. Whenever the sign was made over a sick person, they would be healed immediately.

It is recalled how Francis, knowing of this divine virtue, sent one of his Brothers who was suffering from a form of insanity. Brother Stephen was "signed" and fell into a slumber to wake a little while later cured of his madness.

Three-year-old Mattiolo from Spoleto had a pebble lodged in his nose. Nothing could help remove it and he was close to death by suffocation. Being brought before Clare the stone ejected itself with some force after the sign was made over him. Another boy, from Perugia whose eye was completely covered by a large sore was taken to San Damiano. On seeing him, Clare touched his eye and

made the cross sign with her finger. She asked her religious sister and mother, Ortolana to do the same. At once the child was free from the ulcer and could see clearly again. Clare attested the miracle to her mother, who deferred all of the praise back to her daughter.

The Sign of the Cross healed those among her own community. Sister Benvenuta had suffered for twelve years from a malignant ulcer under the arm and in other places on her body. The usual miraculous remedy healed the festering and discharging wounds. Sister Amata who for many months showed signs of dropsy (an accumulation of fluids in the body tissues) and became laid low with fever and violent coughing fits was restored to perfect health. Sister Christina who was deaf and another Sister who in a vision on the Feast of the Assumption had seen the healing of her voice for she had lost the act of speech were both cured by Clare's saintly touch.

When on one particular occasion the infirmary in the monastery seemed to be filling up with sick sisters of varying ills, Clare paid a

visit and made the sign of the cross in the air five times at which point all five sisters rose from their sick beds after the “remedy” had been applied. Clare drew from the heart of Jesus pierced with a lance, the healing power that He applied through her to those who were suffering. Her empathy and deep faith enabled Christ to heal those for whom she prayed for by making the sign of the cross.

Pope Gregory IX witnessed these signs also on one of his visits to Assisi. He took leave to come to San Damiano and take council with Clare as he wished to hear her speak of heavenly things. Afterwards at mealtime, baked bread rolls were brought from the kitchen to be blessed by the Holy Father who in turn asked Clare to bless them instead. Clare submitted to the holy command and made the Sign of the Cross over the small loaves and at once appeared on each loaf an imprinted cross.

Clare’s love of Jesus and her sisters

Clare grieved daily on the Lords Passion and taught her novice daughters the same. As Clare contemplated the Crucified Christ

her heart, too, was filled with compassion and this extended and overflowed to all around her and fired her prayers for the salvation of souls.

Clare led by example and often shed tears for them in the secret confines of her cell. So intense was her devotion to the five wounds of the crucified Christ that one day at three o'clock, the hour of the Passion, the devil came to Clare's cell and beat her with brutal force causing her eyes to fill with blood and her face to be bruised, but this would only cause Clare to engage more deeply in her acts of prayer to God.

As one Easter approached, Clare again locked in seclusion in her cell meditated on The Last Supper. From Maundy Thursday until the end of Good Friday Clare remained transfixed in remembrance of the Lords suffering, *"All I want is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and to share his sufferings by reproducing the pattern of his death"* (Phillipians 3:10).

Clare would instruct the sisters daily with much discipline yet at the same time offer them such love. They were taught how to

meditate so as to think about God alone, to forget about their previous lives and homes in order to please Christ, to disregard the demands of the body and flesh and how to overcome the wickedness and snares of the all tempting evil one. Finally they must involve themselves with some manual labour and learn how not to speak, but to speak little and about only what is necessary.

Clare provided visiting preachers so that all could hear regularly the Word of God. Clare experienced such happiness during these sessions that one time a small serene and heavenly child appeared at her side during one of the Brothers sermons and a great light appeared around her like the brilliance of the stars and she exuded a most intense sweet fragrance. Sister Agnes of Spello witnessed the child Jesus embraced in Clare's arms and heard His sweet voice: *"My daughter, I am in the midst of you"*.

Clare understood God's compassion and humility for the human race. Compassion was her individual self-emptying whereby she made her heart available for the suffering of others and shared it with them. Humility is often considered the foundation of the

spiritual life and one of the characteristics of true humility is fearlessness, a person, by relinquishing their hold on self-reliance and all forms of security becomes to know they are in fact nothing and rely totally on God. Clare showed this fearlessness in many ways in all she did, by leaving home, confronting the enemy, the devil and even albeit politely and respectfully opposing Popes and Cardinals who tried to persuade her to accept land and revenues.

"I will never in any way wish to be absolved from the following of Christ". Clare stuck to her faithful ideals telling all to make it an act of faith to follow Him in complete trust.

Abbess Clare was always united to God and His compassion was manifested by the way in which she attended to all the sister's welfare and needs. She would allow a less rigorous way if any of her children were unable to cope with the strict observances. If any sister was tempted, Clare would console them with tears and even place her own self at their feet if they were melancholy or sorrowful. In response the community had a great affection and

respect for their Superior and they all tried to follow her way of perfection.

Clare's illness and last days

Clare's long infirmity and work

For all of her remaining twenty-seven years, which was almost half her life, Clare suffered from a mysterious illness embracing a wide range of infirmities that deprived her of physical strength that finally rendered her an invalid and bedridden. Nothing however seemed to bother her and she was never heard to utter a single complaint about her sickness or the poverty that she embraced, so great was her joy to have served the Lord that she exclaimed: *They say we are too poor, but can a heart which possesses the infinite God be truly called poor?"*

One Christmas eve, seeing Clare confined to her bed when all the sisters had left to go to the chapel, Jesus as a reward came to her in her own suffering. At the midnight hour of the Christ Child's nativity when Clare being alone was sad that she would miss the joyful celebrations, suddenly she heard the beautiful music and hymns that were being sung in the Church of St. Francis. There was no ordinary way that this was possible because of the

church's distance from San Damiano and these heavenly praises were carried to her divinely. This miracle of transmission was surpassed even further by Clare being given the supernatural grace to actually witness the proceedings in the Church of St. Francis by seeing the crib and the Holy Infant Child Jesus lying in the manger: and at the right moment being celestially transported to the Mass to receive Holy Communion before being returned to her bed.

In 1251 Clare's medical condition gradually turned the more grave and she found herself confined to her small bed. The rigours of her austere way of life were now beginning to show its toll and the sickness and fatigue had weakened her considerably. Yet even from her sick bed she continued to work for God. Heavy manual tasks were beyond her but not wishing to remain idle, a sister arranged for her to be made comfortable using a pillow that allowed the Holy Clare to sit upright. Using those fingers that healed so many with her sign of the cross and touch, Clare using fine linens that had been supplied, intricately managed to spin

dozens of corporals (white altar cloths on which during the Mass the Eucharistic gifts of bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ). These were wrapped in small silk cases and instructed by Clare to be given to the Franciscan Brothers to distribute to the poorer churches in the surrounding Umbrian mountains, hills and valleys.

Whilst bedridden, the task of waiting on Clare was given to Sister Amata who, one day noticed a great change in her mother Clare; suddenly from appearing all pale and drawn, Clare's features beamed with great smiles and happiness and when questioned about this remarkable change, Clare replied: *"How can I help rejoicing, since at this moment, I hold in my arms my dearest Lord Who is the joy of my soul"*. Christian joy was her triumphal virtue, taking its energy from victory over suffering and like all gifts of grace came to her soul from heaven, mediated by The Lord; And at that moment Jesus revealed His very presence to Amata and she gazed upon Him with such enraptured joy herself.

The Visit of the Pope and Confirmation of her Rule

Throughout her sickness, nothing but prayer, praise and thanksgiving came from her lips and although to her sisters, death seemed but a short time away, God still had further favours to grant his earthy daughter. For many years, (between 1244 and 1251), Pope Innocent IV, due to the hostilities of Frederick II in Italy had taken residence in Lyon, France. Whilst the Pope was still in Lyon, Clare's condition was worsening, yet a Benedictine nun in Clare's original monastery home of San Paolo had a remarkable vision in which she saw the sick Clare lying in bed and whilst all those gathered around her were sobbing, a beautiful lady appeared saying *"My daughters, do not weep and mourn the one who looks dead, for she will live and not die until the Lord and his disciples visit her"*. It was not long after this revelation that the Pontiff left France; Italy was now at peace and Pope Innocent IV headed south and took up a Papal residency in nearby Perugia. Hearing of Clare's serious condition, Cardinal Raynaldus, who would become the next Pope rushed over from Perugia to see Clare, his close

friend and counsellor. He administered Holy Communion and commended Clare and her sisters to God. But what Clare wanted most in her whole life was for the Pope to finally confirm and approve her Rule for her Order in writing. The Cardinal faithfully promised to do for her all he could and as her servant took his leave back to Perugia. Another year passed and Clare still clinging to life waited. And then the realisation took shape; The Papal party moved and took up a temporary seat in Assisi for the Basilica of St. Francis was now complete and ready to be consecrated; the representative of the Most High Lord had arrived at last with his "disciples".

Clare longed to be free of her mortal body and to meet her Lord in the Palaces of the Heavenly Mansions. With strength draining fast from her frail and weak figure, Pope Innocent IV and his entourage of Cardinals made haste to visit the holy handmaiden of Christ. On entering San Damiano, he went straight to the infirmary where Clare was lying supported on her tiny sick bed. He held out his hand to Clare but she wished in further humility to kiss the

sovereign Pontiffs feet. The Pope moved by such a display of reverence climbed on to a wooden stool and Clare was able to turn her head slightly to one side and impress her kiss to his foot.

Clare asked the Holy Father for pardon and to grant her a full remission of all her sins. The Pope with hands raised gave her a full absolution and apostolic benediction after which Clare received the Sacred Host, the Body of Jesus Christ in Holy Communion. Just before he withdrew, Clare quietly asked for the one favour that only he could dispense, to be able to have in her lifetime, written Papal approval of the Rule that she wrote herself for the Order of Poor Ladies.

When all the dignitaries and visitors had left, Clare raised her tear filled eyes heavenward and said to her devoted sisters *“Praise the Lord with me, my daughters; for, on this day, Christ has been pleased to grant me a great favour, which nothing in heaven or on earth can fail to compensate. Today, I have received the Most High God in Holy Communion and have been made worthy to see His Vicar on earth”*.

And still, the final agony of Clare continued, her life was to be prolonged for nearly three more weeks. During all this time her community gathered around her bedside forsaking sleep, finding comfort and relief only in weeping tears day and night. Clare's blessed sister the Abbess Agnes was recalled from the monastery of Monticello near Florence to be at her side and overwhelmed with grief implored Clare not to depart this life without taking her as well. Clare's final gift of prophecy was revealed by the words, *"It pleases God that I go shortly. Stop your own weeping sister, for you shall pass to the Lord not long after I am gone, and before your death the Lord will grant you a great consolation"* and it must be noted that "St. Agnes" died a saintly death in November 1253, just three months later.

For seventeen days Clare was unable to take any food yet she was still able to encourage all who called upon her *"to be strengthened in the service of Christ"*. To Brother Raynaldo who asked her to be patient in her martyrdom of suffering, Clare replied that: *"Ever*

since I have known the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ no suffering has been bothersome, no penance too severe, no infirmity has been hard”.

Clare asked for the Lord’s Passion to be read to her and recommended her holy daughters of poverty to be always mindful of the Divine benefits that come from praise and thanksgiving. Two of St. Francis’ companions came; Brother Leo, his confessor and advisor kissed the dying saint’s bed whilst Brother Angelo, Francis’ first companion consoled the rest of the nuns.

Dying but just holding on to life on Saturday August 10th 1253 her ardent desire to have her Rule confirmed for all time was realised. Signed in Assisi the day before, a group of Friars rushed over the Papal Bull. It was placed in her hands and in great weakness Clare raised it to her lips with great devotion; she could now finally prepare to go in peace to meet her creator.

A Holy Death and Burial

Late into the previous night of Friday 9th August the party of sisters who were keeping a bedside vigil testified that they heard Clare talking very lucidly and calmly to her own soul in what can

be described as her own Magnificat, *“Go forth in peace, for you will have good company on your journey”*. She continued, *“Go forth, for He Who created you has sanctified you, and, having protected you always, has loved you with the tender love that a mother gives her child”*. Clare then prayed: *“Thank you Lord for having created me”*.

Clare throughout the night would pray her favourite devotion to the Five Wounds of Christ and told another Sister Agnes in her very last words: *“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his holy ones”* and it was during these final hours of passage a miraculous vision all around occurred. Sister Benvenuta gazed towards the monastery door and beheld a procession of Virgins dressed in white robes and wearing golden crowns upon their heads. Amidst them walked one greater, more beautiful whose crown more resplendent like a thurible from which came forth a brilliant luminance that turned the night into day. The Blessed Virgin Mary approached the bed of our holy saint and leaning towards her most lovingly, took Clare and embraced her within her sweet arms. Mary then covered Clare with the most exquisite

and delicate cloth and the two Maidens of the Lord became as one, indistinguishable from each other and the room became radiantly adorned. Clare's contemplative journey was coming to an end that would culminate in her vision of the "*King of Glory*". The Monday's summer evening light of August 11th 1253 was starting to fade, this was the great feast day of Saint Ruffino, Assisi's patron, and Sister Filippa, Clare's life long friend described how truly clear and without stain, without darkness of sin that Clare passed peacefully from this life to the Lord, to the clarity of eternal light.

The news of Clare's death caused the populace of Assisi to come running to San Damiano and the mayor and the city knights kept a vigil guard around their treasured lady. The following day, the Pope, Cardinals and Priests came to Celebrate the Funeral Mass. Pope Innocent IV was eager to canonise her instantly and had to be persuaded by his assistant Cardinal Raynaldus to wait a while in due reflection of her holiness.

After the concluding funeral rites Clare's holy remains were carried on a bier to be buried in the Church of St. George by Assisi's eastern gate.

Cause, Miracles and Canonisation

Within a few weeks of Clare's death, the Holy Father Pope Innocent IV opened the promotion and examination of her cause for canonisation. The postulator was the Bishop of Spoleto who was also assisted by the Franciscan Friars, Leo and Angelo and others. Very soon after Clare's death the team was officially dispatched to San Damiano to interview the community of sisters who had all known Clare personally, and during this period the Bishop took it upon himself to investigate and question the citizens of Assisi and others who had either known Clare personally or had benefited from her intercession or miracles. He used as his base for all these interviews the Church of San Paolo in the centre of Assisi. In all there were thirteen sisters residing in the monastery of San Damiano who testified under oath in great detail regarding the sanctity of their Mother Abbess in recounting her

holy life within the enclosed walls and they attested to the miracles already mentioned to date in this biography. Those inhabitants of Assisi and surrounding towns were able to recall Clare's life from childhood, through conversion to her becoming their Mother of those in need. Those who gave testimony recalled her great love of the poor, her *"honesty, kindness and humility"* and *"Compassion for people's body and souls."*

During the examination of Clare's sanctity many miracles were truly recorded and attributed after her death. A boy from Perugia who suffered from such a possession of his soul that he would throw himself in the fire and perform so many acts of violence to his own body that could misshape and distort itself was brought by his father and placed on Clare's tomb to which he was immediately freed from these diabolical attacks which never returned. Two other women and a youth from France showing similar effects were also cured at the sepulchre having had their paralysis cured, withered hand and lives being restored to normal.

A young man suffering from daily epileptic fits and contracted legs was placed by the tomb and on the third day his leg was heard to “snap” back into place and he was also healed of his epilepsy. Another Perugian man whose hand had been crushed by a stone and considered amputation the only cure saw his hand restored to its former healthy condition while another who due to a wasting disease was no more than a bare skeleton bent double and hardly able to walk, arose straight, walking and praising God and the merits of the holy virgin Clare.

Two boys from birth and destined to remain chronically disabled all their life as they could only move by crawling had their lameness taken away by the power of Clare through God.

Two other small children were literally saved from the jaws of death; the angry and ferocious teeth of wolves had carried them away into the forests. The pious pleas and prayers of their mothers to the glorious virgin Clare did not fall on empty ears and the wolves, like thieves caught in the act let loose their prey.

Those with tumours, cancers of the throat were made well again.

One girl felt the twenty small lumps that caused such an intense pain gradually soften and disappear completely and a similar miraculous healing of the throat had occurred to Sister Andrea at San Damiano in Clare's own lifetime.

There were recorded many other remarkable miracles but we will conclude with our saint herself appearing over three nights in a dream to a blind man many miles away asking him to visit her so that he may see again. After falling into a light slumber at her tomb, he was awakened by her voice, and arising at once he could see clearly and the light had returned to which he glorified God and exhorted all to bless Him for this great wonder through the merits of Clare.

In the months that had passed since Clare's death, her fame as a fountain of holiness and miracle worker had spread throughout the world and it fell upon the shoulders of Cardinal Raynaldus who had become the new Pope Alexander IV and the collegiate to examine the extraordinary life of Clare. The commission

concluded and confirmed "*Clare, while living was a most shining and resplendent example of every virtue and that in death was worthy of admiration for real and proven miracles*". The commission all agreed that Clare did truly merit to be glorified on earth, since God had glorified her in heaven.

Two short years had passed since Clare's death and the Church had gathered some forty miles to the south east of Rome at the Cathedral in the Popes home city of Agnani and thousands had flocked to this great celebration to witness the proceedings. The Pope in his opening sentence from his Bull of Canonisation proclaimed that Clare was "*a clear and shining light*" that "*now shines in heaven*" ... *and on earth*". In his great long address he revealed her complete "*Brilliance*" calling her "*The Princess of the Poor*" and then when her life story had been told and before the gathered multitudes, the Holy Pontiff declared and raised the holy virgin Clare into the realm of Sainthood.

The Assisi of St. Clare today

St. Clare's body and Basilica

After death, one of the main reasons for St. Clare's internment in the Church of Saint George within the eastern part of Assisi rather than San Damiano was to protect her sacred remains and relics from any would be thieves, as in medieval times it was not an uncommon practice for the bodies or relics of saints to be "kidnapped" for veneration elsewhere. The Church of Saint George however was still a relatively small place to be able to hold and assist the vast number of pilgrims who were travelling from not just over all of Italy but from places much further a field. It was decided as a matter of duty that the inhabitants of Assisi would construct a building that would be a home befitting that of a great saint. Seven years later in 1260 the brand new Church and monastery were completed and on the 3rd October Pope Alexander IV came to Assisi on the Feast of St. Francis to preside over the translation of St. Clare's body to its new resting place. At the same time it was also arranged for the Community of Sisters to

be transferred from San Damiano to their new residence in the monastery that was attached to the new cathedral where they could be close to their beloved Saint and Mother Clare.

On opening the tomb some seven years after death, the body of St. Clare was found to be totally incorrupt as though she had just fallen asleep. St. Clare was then received with papal honour and her body placed in a stone coffin beneath the High Altar, the deep cavity being then sealed with solid brick and masonry once again for the sake of protection from any marauding trophy hunters. The Cathedral was dedicated to St. Clare on the same day and five years later in 1265 it was consecrated by Pope Clement IV and the holy shrine became the Basilica of St Clare. Nearly six hundred years later in 1850 with permission granted from the Holy See and in keeping with the desire of the faithful to be closer rather than obscured from their saints it was agreed that the tomb could be opened and a new place of veneration be found within the basilica. It took the workforce seven full days and nights to excavate and reach the stone coffin and on Sunday 22nd September the tomb was

to be opened. The metal straps were cut and the lid was slowly raised using a system of rope pulleys.

The heavy stone coffin lid was removed delicately and the body was found to be intact and in a preserved state, and on her breast, resting still, lay a laurel branch and a crown of flowers.

Where her body had rested a large crypt was hewn out of the stone floor and a magnificent chapel and crystal reliquary designed and erected. In 1872 St. Clare was moved from her sojourn in the nun's choir to the new shrine under the guidance of Pope Pius IX for all to see and to remain in sight for public veneration, clothed in her habit with her face, hands and feet bare.

In 1893 what had been remarkably hidden since St. Clare's death was found in an even more remarkable place. Whilst her habit was being rearranged the original Rule for the Order that she wrote in her own hand was found in the folds of her mantle.

St. Clare's Basilica is constructed of the unique pink stone cut from the quarries of Mount Subasio behind and the façade is dominated by a large concentric circular rose window, that in the afternoon,

captures the sun to decorate the cathedral both inside and out in a delicate soft gauze of light. Leading out from the rampart arches and façade is the Piazza di Santa Chiara from which you are greeted with a vast panoramic view across the Umbrian valley towards Montefalco and Perugia. As you enter the basilica, to your right is the Chapel of the San Damiano Cross; the original large iconic crucifix that spoke to St. Francis and under which St. Clare spent her forty two years; today it hangs suspended in front of all and under which the pilgrims pray:

All Highest, Glorious God, Cast your light into the darkness of my heart.

Give me right faith, firm hope, perfect humility,

with wisdom and perfection, O Lord,

so that I may do what is your holy will. Amen.

This chapel is what remains of the original Church of St. George and is the oldest part of the edifice. Opposite you will find the Chapel where our saint's mother and sister, Blessed Ortolana and St. Agnes are buried, here also the Blessed Sacrament is reserved and is place for quiet and private prayer.

The entrance to the crypt is by stairs from the centre of the basilica, and on the way down you also have the opportunity to view a large array of relics that include St. Clare's long golden locks of hair, the hair shirt, mantle and habit that she wore. Descending further stairs we come to St. Clare herself, resting for all to see in that same crypt. In 1980 the body of St., Clare being exposed for so long had begun to show signs of deterioration and it was decided for environmental protection to encase the whole of her body in a perfectly measured ceramic kind of lifelike moulding and what we see today is the body St. Clare sleeping on a slightly raised wooden pillow in a more simple crystal glass coffin holding her flowers.

Walking in her footsteps to San Damiano

Assisi is a preserved city and pilgrims arriving find themselves immediately transported back to the twelfth century. Little has changed and it is very easy to still walk the paths, squares and ways of the saints who lived and passed this way before. Traffic is mostly prohibited and Assisi remains the domain of the

pedestrian. In some ways the amount of tourists and pilgrims are a little disproportionate in so much as many day visitors arrive and flock to the three tiered Basilica of St. Francis at Assisi's western end and that taking up a lot of the day may not allow them time to wander further into the city and the Basilica of St Clare and her surroundings can be relatively quiet. To really explore the spirituality of a place takes time and at least two or three full days are needed in Assisi.

St. Clare's house and doorway from which she would leave and go to Mass in San Ruffino are the starting point in her journey. The construction of San Ruffino was inaugurated in 1140 and this is the original cathedral of Assisi where you can see the font from which the baptismal waters washed over Saints Clare and Francis. The foot of the hill of Assisi where our saint fled to the Porziuncula can be easily reached by a short winding bus trip or by a newly built set of pilgrims steps which are very steep and lead you some two miles or so to what is the new town of Assisi and the enormous Basilica of Saint Mary of the Angels dominating the valley, which

was built over and houses the Porziuncula itself, the little church that St. Francis lived in.

The Monastery and Church of San Damiano is reached by a relatively short, steep and very scenic walk via the eastern gate of Assisi. At this point we are reminded that Clare's love embraced all creation and she would tell those sisters serving outside the walls *"to praise God when they saw beautiful trees, flowers and bushes; and likewise, always praise Him in all things when they saw all peoples and creatures"*.

The monastery which today is looked after by the Franciscan Friars could well be described as being the most perfect haven of peace and tranquillity that you may ever discover. Set amid the olive groves this is the centre of St. Clare's world. To walk and sit in the cloisters, garden and courtyard with its views of the surrounding countryside is inspiring, enlightening and very calming. The chapel, (Mass is still celebrated here, early each morning), the refectory and St. Clare's cell with all with their original benches and tables remain just as they did eight hundred

years ago and provide us with a physical link to the past and today this is most certainly a centre of spirituality, a place to reflect quietly and to be still and from the memorial Mass on the feast of St. Clare we can meditate on Psalm 16:11 *"You will reveal the path of life to me, give me unbounded joy in your presence"*.

St. Clare's Patronage and legacy

The Feast Day of Saint Clare today falls on August 11th. Originally in the Church's calendar of saints it was August 12th, this was because although Clare died on the 11th, this was also the feast day of Assisi's patron Saint Ruffino. Today St. Clare is not only a Patron to the faithful citizens of Assisi, she is the patron saint of eye disease and eyes being renown for her miracle of intercession as described earlier, the patron of embroiderers (needle work) for how she was able whilst infirm to spin the fine corporals and in 1958 Pope Pius XII declared St. Clare in a most modern way, the patron saint of television due to that time one Christmas when she was too ill to leave her bed she saw projected on her wall and

heard, even though it was happening a few miles away the whole liturgy of the Midnight Mass.

Clare in her own life time saw the foundation of 153 monasteries for her Order, today there are 900 monasteries in 76 countries with over 20,000 Poor Clare Sisters.

St. Clare has a lot to teach us in the twenty first century and is there as a lantern to help us find our steps along the way. Clare would definitely shy away from the title of "Great Saint". The way she was so great was in the way she was so humble. She would take her leave from scripture: *"Do all that has to be done without complaining or arguing and then you will be innocent and genuine, and you will shine in the world like bright stars"* (Phillipians 2:14-16). It was her way of life and her treasure of spirituality that is our great legacy as St. Clare asks us always *"to strive always to imitate the way of holy simplicity and humility"*.

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Where Art & Books Collide

About the Writer - John Paul Kirkham

John Paul Kirkham is a poet, photographer and writer living in the city of Liverpool and is the author of many books including the well known anthology of poetry "In Violet" and is the official biographer of Saint Clare of Assisi and Saint Gemma Galgani. John Paul studied in the 1970's at the John Laird School of Art in Merseyside leading to a long career as a photographer firstly in forensics (yes the scary stuff of "Silent Witness") then general press, running a studio, advertising, documentary film making and managing Britains largest private photographic and film archive. John Paul notably spent twelve years on Kensington Palace's royal photographic rota with HRH Diana - Princess of Wales and over the years has featured on television, radio and as a real life character in Blake Morrisons book of stories "Too True"

If you would like to know more and to access the poetry, photographs and books, then please visit the website www.johnpaulkirkham.simplesite.com

About the Front Cover Artist - Jan Kalinski

The celebrated artist Jan Kalinski is based in the south of England among Kent's leafy lanes. Jan spent many years teaching drawing and painting in Western Canada and works in oils, acrylics and digital mediums. In 1992 Jan was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis (MS) resulting in permanent numbness of his fingers. He can no longer hold a fine pencil or write his own name but will not let go of a paintbrush and his work today continues to be stunning as ever. Find him at www.jankalinski.art

