

## Clare and Poverty –Solidarity with the Poor

Francis and Clare lived during a unique period in European history at the turn of the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries. They straddled the threshold between the new market-based economy and the older agrarian feudalism when wealth was concentrated in land ownership. In the old system, prosperity was virtually exclusive to the privileged noble class through the rents generated from their land. However, this began to change in the century before Francis' birth, as the upwardly mobile merchants began creating wealth for themselves not based on land-rights, but on trading. This led to the revitalization of the cities as people moved from the countryside into town (where the markets were located) to try to participate in the new economy. However, the rise of the middle-class's new status challenged the well-entrenched nobility who were not about to let go of their centuries-old birthrights, titles, and affluence.

While Francis was the son of a burgher from the growing 'middle' or merchant class, Clare was from an upper noble family. As children, even though from different perspectives – but both privileged – they observed the direct conflicts of their classes. The nobles were not going down without a fight. In fact, in 1198 when Clare was a girl, her family was driven to Perugia together with other noble families by the merchants who declared Assisi an independent *comune* and took over the government.

Precisely in this race up the economic ladder, in the conflict between the *Majores* and *Minores* for money and power, Francis and Clare discerned many injustices. Along with the money generated for the emerging mercantile class, came many new social problems. The migration to the cities led to overcrowding, destitution, begging, and the facile spread of contagious diseases like leprosy, fueled by close human contact mixed

with poor hygiene. Vices such as prostitution flourished, thriving on the anonymity that city life offered. Further, competition for the new money intensified age-old sins such as avarice, greed, dishonesty, envy, etc.

In all of this, Francis and Clare witnessed many people marginalized from society; they witnessed daily the pain in the faces of the beggars, the lame, the outcast, the disfigured, the disabled, and the lepers. They wondered why so many could fall destitute while others wasted their surplus— this, despite their faith that God created everyone in his own image. It was with this group of people that Francis and Clare sought solidarity. Thus Francis and Clare rejected their own inheritances and birthrights and voluntarily embraced poverty. Francis and Clare chose to be poor on many levels and for diverse reasons, but here I will focus on how Clare did so in an effort to identify with the poor.

When looking at Clare's life, it is pertinent to be aware of the dramatic social and economic differences between the classes. While today, our society is much more democratic, in Clare's lifetime, there were strong differences between the poor and nobility. In essence, the privileged were served by the poor. The brilliance of Clare's spiritual life and choices cannot be understood outside of that context, which can be characterized by Jesus' words:

“whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave. Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”<sup>1</sup>  
A study of her life will show that her choices as a religious Sister are a rejection of the privileges and birthrights of her family to encompass the life of a poor servant.

We can start with a look at the initial developments of her religious life. Clare eventually settled in San Damiano, however, after receiving her tonsure from Francis, she

immediately went to stay at the privileged monastery of San Paolo delle Abbadesse. Marco Bartoli states that this was the most important monastery of Benedictine women in the diocese of Assisi.<sup>2</sup> Here were primarily nuns of noble origin who lived comfortably with servants in a privileged monastery built up with their large dowries. Clare came from the same advantaged and noble background and merited the same position within the monastery. However, she radically departed from that tradition by giving away her possessions before entering. Thus, she had renounced her birth right, arriving not as a noblewoman but as a poor servant!<sup>3</sup>

She soon left the Benedictines for another community called Panzo on the slopes of Subasio where she spent another brief sojourn with a group of women experimenting with new ways of religious life most likely in a hermitage or hospice. From there, Clare went to San Damiano, where she would stay the rest of her life. This was the same ruined church formerly ‘renovated’ by Francis himself. Here in San Damiano, Clare put her new life into practice, and this hermitage is important toward understanding Clare’s attitudes toward poverty.

Revealing is its position outside the city walls: it stood where the poor lived. The city walls for the medievals created more than just a fortified defense – they delineated the boundaries of its residents’ identity, creating a sense of belonging. Within the walls were the various *borghi* (or neighborhoods) separated by class status. Just as today’s American cities are often surrounded by large beltways or perimeters containing distinct neighborhoods within – some desirable, others less – the same was true in Clare’s day. In fact, the nobility lived higher up the slopes towards the *Rocca* fort, while the middle class burghers lived in the center of town near the market (surrounding today’s *Piazza del*

*Comune*), and the poor lived at the bottom of the slope and outside the city walls. One might even use the terms downtown, midtown, uptown. Thus, Clare's position outside the walls had two consequences. First, it placed the Sisters outside the social context entirely, which detached them from its politics and social protocol and liberated them from those issues; since they were 'out of the fray', they were free of it. Second, their position among the poor created solidarity with the poor. By living with the poor and embracing poverty, they were free.

Within the monastery, the Sisters had adopted ways of life which also suggested identification with the poor. One very significant custom within the walls of San Damiano was the elimination of the monastic distinction between *conversi* and *choristi* (described in footnote number 3 below). The only requirement for entrance was to give away whatever one owned (if one owned anything).<sup>4</sup> Clare wished for all the Sisters to live a fraternal life as equal sisters by developing fraternity, community, belonging, and intimacy. No one would enjoy a privileged status, but all would be servants to the other. Thus, the woman of peasant background who joined them would not be subject to a demeaning way of life within the monastery a result of her birth, but would enjoy the dignity conferred on her as a child of God as an equal with everyone else.

One way in which this played out is that everybody worked. Whether one came from high or low background, there was no separation of assignments based on class distinction, as there were between the *choristi* and *conversi*.<sup>5</sup> In chapter Seven of her Rule, Clare prescribes how work assignments are to be assigned and rotated by the abbess. She says "At the chapter, in the presence of all, the abbess or her vicaress is bound to assign the work that each should perform with her hands."<sup>6</sup>

Noteworthy also is the phrase ‘with her hands’ (*Id quod minibus suis operantur*). In Clare’s society, the upper class did not do manual labor – their servants did. Manual labor – like working in the fields, cleaning house, artiginal work, and smithwork – carried the stigma as occupations of those low-born, and was something entirely avoided by the wealthy. But Clare encouraged her Sisters to work with their hands, in another sign of solidarity with the poor. In fact, they supported themselves by the *work of their hands*: they grew their own food in the garden (like the peasants); they sewed and embroidered items that could be sold/traded or given away in exchange for gifts. There were no fixed prices attached, rather the fruits of the Sisters’ labors were given away allowing the recipients to be free to give back. Here we see how work for the Sisters had an anti-economic criteria, it was given away at a price on the ‘buyer’s terms’! It would have been disarming to receive such a gift, and that person would most likely to give back generously (or just the same not at all). Finally, in an act of the lowest, most mortifying poverty, when still in need – the Sisters even went into the city to beg!<sup>7</sup> This was the lowest thing one could do in her epoch, and an activity that Clare’s sisters routinely engaged in.

Thus we see that the Sisters stood in solidarity with the poor by rejecting ownership of things – especially property – and embracing poverty. While the wealthy nobility and merchants had property, the peasants did not. Francis’ writings generally focused on the poverty (and avoidance) of money, while Clare focused her emphasis on the poverty of property, consistent with her upbringing from the land-owning class. Thus, she identified with the poor by rejecting ownership.

Both Francis and Clare noted the problems and challenges created by the new market economy in their society: they personally witnessed the conflicts for pre-eminence between their family classes – both armed and in the tribunals; they perceived the anxiety and fear that the wealth and power would be lost; they looked up the walls and defensive fortifications to keep others out, which they saw so many marginalized. The response of both Francis and Clare was *minoritas* (lesserness); it was stepping down and out of the worldly struggles and becoming like those at the bottom.

Clare's spirituality built on poverty shows us another way. She teaches us that wealth, success, and material goods are not necessarily signs of God's blessings; following that line of reasoning, one could conclude that a lack of material goods suggests the absence of God's favor. Clare, ironically by emptying herself of material goods finds God's goodness abundantly. Her embrace of poverty does not lead to self-sufficiency, rather it forces her to be dependent on others creating inter-dependence with those around her. Thus, she shows us another way: that God becomes abundant in poverty; that in giving away one receives; and that the poor, marginalized, and oppressed have God on their side, too.

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 26: 28

<sup>2</sup> Bartoli, Marco. *Clare of Assisi*. Translated by Frances Teresa, OSC, p. 79. Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1993. p. 53.

<sup>3</sup> Medieval monastic vocations were defined by two ranks of monks and nuns: the privileged *choristi* (usually from noble families) who chanted the Office, and *conversi* (from 'low-born' backgrounds) who did most of the manual labor and, since they were mostly illiterate, prayed rote prayers consisting of Our Fathers, Hail Marys, and Glory-Bes.

<sup>4</sup> In Clare's Form of Life, Chapter 2, she says "If she [the candidate] is suitable, let the words of the Gospel be addressed to her that she should go and sell all that she has and take care to distribute the proceeds to the poor."

<sup>5</sup> In Chapter Eight of her Rule, Clare speaks of certain Sisters who serve outside of the monastery – a type of 'extern'. However, it does not seem that they were chosen based on class.

<sup>6</sup> The Form of Life of Saint Clare, chapter seven.

<sup>7</sup> Cf Bartoli, p. 60.