

## Francis, Clare, and the Great Chain of Being

During the lifetimes of Francis and Clare in the high Middle Ages, the ‘Great Chain of Being’ defined people’s understanding of the universe. This medieval concept understood the universe in a hierarchical (vertical) structure with Heaven above the earth. God reigned in Heaven with the angels and saints subordinate to him. In the material world below, humans were on top, with animals, plants, and stones underneath them in that order.

People were ranked hierarchically and sub-divided according to class and profession. Class determined how they related to one another: one always served someone higher in rank, and was served, in turn, by someone of lower rank. One’s class was mostly determined by the class of his father, and was difficult to change. This is known as *feudalism*. People were in one of two categories: noble or common. The nobility was ruled on top by an emperor or monarch (king or queen); then came dukes, marquises, counts, barons, and finally knights. The commoners consisted of a middle class: merchants, shopkeepers, and tradesmen. Then came lower class commoners: town watchmen, household servants, peasants (farmers), shepherds, beggars, thieves, crippled, lepers, and finally criminals. Underneath the created world was the spiritual underworld. The Church had its own hierarchy. On top was the Pope, then cardinals, archbishops, bishops, abbots, archpriests, priests, deacons, sub-deacons, monks, nuns, oblates, third order laypersons, penitents, and finally lay faithful.

The influence that this worldview had on people during Francis’s and Clare’s era cannot be overemphasized. People were keenly aware of the class to which they and others belonged. According to the ways of the natural world, one sought to go up the ladder, never down. Before Francis’s conversion, he sought to move up the ladder from the merchant class to the nobility by becoming a knight. Thus he sought out war on two occasions. The first time he was imprisoned for one year. The second time, he journeyed from Assisi to southern Italy, but had a dream in Spoleto en route. In the dream, a voice (God) asked him if it was better to serve the Lord or a servant. Francis (according to the great chain of being) responded that it was better to serve someone higher, not lower. The voice then asked him why he was serving servants. Francis abandoned his desire to become a knight and returned to Assisi. He then began to reflect on how he had been seeking his own will and not God’s; he had been seeking the kingdom of earth, not the Kingdom of Heaven. A short time later, Francis left everything and began serving the poor, especially the lepers – the lowliest of society. Clare, on the other hand, was always holy, even as a child; she and the women in her family had often served the poor, albeit from their privileged household. So it seems that Clare did not undergo a radical conversion like Francis. However, she did leave her family’s wealth and noble privileges in order to follow Francis in complete poverty. After Clare left her household, she entered a Benedictine convent for mostly noble-born women. An important point to note is that in the convents of Clare’s day, nuns of noble birth were often served by nuns of low birth. But Clare entered the convent with nothing – as a lowborn commoner. She chose to enter as a servant! Eventually, she lived in San Damiano outside the city walls where the poor lived. Class status was abandoned among the sisters and they were all equal. In San Damiano, Clare and the sisters dedicated themselves to fraternal service of one another in solidarity with the poor.

Francis and Clare were dedicating their lives to Christian *minoritas*. This is a word they both used in their writings, and is even part of the name of Francis’s order (order of friars *minor*); it was also an early name for Clare’s movement, as well. It means “lessness,” but could also be defined as humility, poverty, trust, obedience, etc. Why did Francis and Clare dedicate themselves to

minority, poverty and lesserness? *Because they were imitating God, whom they believed was "minor."*

Francis and Clare observed that God, in an act of divine humility, had emptied himself of the glories of Heaven in order to assume lesser human flesh. He chose to be born to poor parents: Joseph was a carpenter who worked with his hands. Working with one's hands in Francis's and Clare's day was something the commoners did, not the nobility. Jesus frequently associated with tax collectors and prostitutes – the lowliest of Palestinian society. And finally, Jesus went to the cross to die as a convicted criminal – the lowliest place possible. And even after his death, he went down to the lowest place possible – to Hell (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 632-637). But these were not just historical one-time events: God still allows himself to become transformed into bread and wine for us. He does all this out of love!

Francis and Clare believed that the Kingdom of Heaven lay in seeking to imitate Christ in *minoritas* and humility. Francis recognized that by trying to propel himself 'up' the ladder, he was set in conflict with the world. He realized that seeking worldly honors and glory did not bring him peace. On the contrary by trying to become a knight, he ended up spending a year imprisoned and was later depressed. His conversion began by seeking the ways of God and embracing *minoritas*. He chose to go *down* the ladder to the bottom in order to serve the lowliest of society – the lepers. That is when he understood the difference between earthly and heavenly rewards. Up until that point he had been seeking earthly rewards and glories; but when he finally embraced *minoritas* and humility, he began receiving heavenly rewards. Then he understood the difference between the earthly kingdom and the Kingdom of Heaven. Francis sought to imitate Christ out of obedience. In the Gospel, he saw that Christ had emptied himself of the glories of Heaven out of obedience to his Father. So for Francis, obedience meant emptying himself of all earthly glories, honors, privileges, and wealth. Clare sought to be poor in order to imitate God, whom she viewed as poor.

Francis and Clare chose to go down in the world – to become minor – in order to be lifted up by the Holy Spirit into the Kingdom of Heaven – even while remaining in the world. Their earthly poverty allowed them to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Only by going down (as Jesus did when he left the glories of Heaven to go all the way down to the cross and eventually into Hell) did Francis and Clare experience the true Kingdom of Heaven on earth. When they (Francis) had been following the ways of the world and seeking the opposite of *minoritas* (greatness, self-elevation, pride, wealth, self-will, arrogance) they did not experience the things of Heaven and the grace of God did not reside in them. When Francis and Clare sought to live like Christ in humility, poverty, trust, obedience, they experienced the grace of God and the true Kingdom of Heaven. "So humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time." (1 Peter 5: 6)

Since mankind was "spiritually" poor and deprived of eternal values, Christ made Himself "physically" poor (even helpless), in order to bring spiritual riches to man and enable him to gain possession of the Kingdom of Heaven. It may appear that God the Father turned the world upside down by sending his Son – God almighty – from the glories of Heaven into the misery of the world in such a lowly state; however, the world was already upside down. Through Jesus's Incarnation, presence, and example of serving the lowliest of the world, he turned it right side up and showed us the proper way to live. Francis and Clare dedicated their lives to imitating Jesus who showed them how to earn the true Kingdom of Heaven through *minoritas* – lesserness, humility, and service. Only then, could they inherit the true Kingdom. "Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10: 42-45)