

# Faith Alive!

## *Reflections on Spirituality and Spiritual Life*

### **Clare of Assisi:**

#### **A Life of Prayer and Simplicity**

Clare (1193-1253), firstborn to a noble family from Assisi, chose a lifestyle of poverty and humility inspired by the example and conversations with Francis of Assisi. The knights of her home castle sought unsuccessfully to drag her home when they discovered she had crept out unnoticed the night of Palm Sunday, 1212, to begin religious life. Francis and his companions had prepared a residence for Clare, and the noble women who joined her, at the chapel outside the city walls referred to as San Damiano.

About five years before Clare took up residence at San Damiano, it was an abandoned chapel in need of repair that Saint Francis had found for solitude when he returned to Assisi after being a prisoner of war in Perugia. One day while he was praying before a large icon of the Crucified Christ, he heard Jesus say, "Francis, repair my house which you see is falling to ruin." Francis' religious experience compelled him to find some friends to assist in repairing the church. While doing so, he prophesied to passers-by, "Come and help me for women shall live here to glorify our heavenly Father by their holy manner of life." This prophecy was uttered before Francis knew Clare who would come to live and make her home at San Damiano for forty years.

Clare heard of the unusual conversion of the merchant's son, Francis, who was living a penitential life rebuilding churches. She sent money and food to the men working at the Portiuncula chapel in the valley below Assisi. Her reputation for holiness was well

known. According to Clare's sister Beatrice, after Francis had been authorized by Pope Innocent III to preach, he came to Clare to talk about the place that he had renovated and prepared for a women's residence at San Damiano.

The women who lived at San Damiano were called Poor Ladies because they lived simply with only enough land around the monastery for a garden. Clare's love of Jesus, who did not deem his divinity as an entitlement but who chose to live simply without property, enflamed her heart and motivated her insistence to live in poverty. Their contemplative prayer life edified others. Because they were living outside the city walls, the Poor Ladies were vulnerable to attacks by mercenary soldiers of the Holy Roman Empire. On two occasions when it seemed the men would intrude into their space, Clare's prayerful intercession to God spared the Sisters from any harm.

Like the cloistered women of her time, prayer was Clare's ministry. Prayer ministry benefits the entire Church by extending Christ's mercy, compassion, and healing to those being prayed for. Also, prayer transforms the person praying to become a pliable piece of clay in the Potter's hand, an instrument of peace and healing for others. In the official life of Clare promulgated within three years of her death, the world learned of Clare's healing touch: "The beloved Crucified took possession of the lover, and she was inflamed with such love of the mystery of the Cross that the power of the Cross is shown by signs and miracles."

*The Life of Clare* also describes how she appropriated the graces of her Baptism to become one with Jesus so that through her the Gospel was proclaimed: “These signs will accompany those who believe...they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.” Clare’s healing touch was so well known that Saint Francis sent to her a troubled friar with seizures, and he was healed. San Damiano became a type of walk-in clinic where mothers brought sick children so Clare could make the sign of the cross on them, the sign that healed them.

Clare’s choice to live simply without any endowment or more land than just a small garden area was unprecedented for women religious in the thirteenth century. Each pope during her life tried to give her a Rule for her Sisters to be more like the monastic orders, but this was contrary to her vision to follow in the footsteps of Francis. She wanted assurance that her dependency on God to provide for the Sisters in their life of poverty would continue past her own lifetime. Shortly before she died on August 11, 1253, Pope Innocent IV put his papal seal on a form of life that Clare had written for herself and her sisters. The Form of Life written by Clare was the first time in history that a woman had written a rule for a religious order. That is the rule the Poor Clares live today.

What do cloistered women do besides hours of private and communal prayer? During the years following the 1215 Fourth Lateran Council, Clare collaborated with the friars to increase reverence of churches by weaving and embroidering altar linens which she sent with friars to newly cleaned churches. She encouraged some Sisters to walk to nearby leprosarium to tend to the sick lepers, and she sent her own sister, Agnes, to monasteries near Florence to further the spiritual formation of other monasteries desirous to follow the lifestyle Clare initiated at San Damiano. Clare did a form of preaching from the cloister by writing

letters of spiritual advice to Saint Agnes of Prague. These letters convey Clare’s spirituality providing the reader with instruction for living the spiritual life.

The Sisters who lived with Clare told of an unusual incident that inspired Pope Pius XII in 1958 to name Clare as the patroness of television. On Christmas Eve in 1252, the year before Clare died, she was so ill that she could not join the Sisters who walked to the Basilica of Saint Francis to participate in the praying of Matins. The next morning when the Sisters came to tell her of the jubilant liturgy, she surprised them by describing the crib scene, recounting the hymns that were sung, and even naming the instruments accompanying the singing. God did not leave her alone that night, but provided her with a prototype of television—the broadcast of the liturgy in her dormitory.

Clare modeled Gospel life by living in a community without social status, serving others, and loving God above all. Today, we are networked through information technology (IT) with the global family using our talents to improve society and to honor God. How might Clare serve as an exemplar for us? Her contemplative prayer life that nurtured her activity could serve as a reminder to us to choose times to “unplug” in order to listen to the quiet, and to reflect on God’s presence with us.

By Ramona Miller, OSF

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## References

Armstrong, R. J. (Ed.). (2006). *The Lady: Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*. New York: New City Press.

Bartoli, M. (1993). *Clare of Assisi*. (Frances Teresa, Trans.). Quincy, IL: The Franciscan Press.

Miller, R. (1993). *In the Footsteps of Clare: A Pilgrim's Guidebook*. St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications.

## Feast Day for Saint Clare of Assisi

Clare of Assisi's feast day is August 11<sup>th</sup>.

She is the patron saint of eye disorders and television.

## Prayers and Quotes of Saint Clare

*A blessing from St. Clare*

What you hold may you always hold.  
What you do,  
may you always do and never abandon.  
But with swift pace,  
light step and unswerving feet,  
so that even your steps stir up no dust,  
Go forward,  
the spirit of our God has called you.  
(BCI – Blessing of Cl)

"What you hold, may you always hold,  
What you do, may you always do and never abandon. But with swift pace, light step, unswerving feet, so that even your steps stir up no dust, may you go forward securely, joyfully, and swiftly, on the path of prudent happiness, not believing anything that would dissuade you from this resolution or that would place a stumbling block for you on the way, so that you may offer your vows to the Most High in the pursuit of that perfection to which the Spirit of the Lord has called you" (2LtAg – Second Letter to Agnes of Prague, 11-14).

"O most noble Queen, gaze upon Him, consider Him, contemplate Him, as you desire to imitate Him" (2LtAg – Second Letter to Agnes of Prague, 20).

## Recommended Reading

Bodo, M. (1992). *Clare: A Light in the Garden*. Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press.

Delio, I. (2007). *Clare of Assisi: A heart full of love*. Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press.

Miller, R. (1993). *In the Footsteps of Clare: A Pilgrim's Guidebook*. St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications.

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### Tavola of Saint Clare

The Tavola of Saint Clare was painted in 1283 by a person known only as the “St. Clare Master.” The tavola was possibly commissioned by Pope Martin IV drawing on Thomas of Celano’s Legend. The tavola is a painting on wood. This particular tavola is found in the Basilica of Saint Clare in Assisi. It is a full-length portrait of Clare with eight insets along the sides that depict important events in her life.

The events progress clockwise, from the bottom left. They depict Clare’s spiritual life.

The eight episodes from Clare’s life are:

1. Bishop Guido extends a palm to Clare at the Palm Sunday liturgy, March 1212 (LegCl 7);
2. Francis at the Portiuncola welcomes Clare (LegCl 7-8);
3. The tonsure is the beginning of new life, a life of poverty (LegCl 8);
4. Uncle Monaldo assaults Clare at San Paolo Monastery in Bastia (LegCl 9);
5. Agnes joins her sister at Panzo (LegCl 24-26);
6. Clare provides bread when there was little to eat (LegCl 15);
7. Blessed Virgin Mary comes to San Damiano to escort Clare to heaven (LegCl 46); and
8. Pope Innocent IV presides at Clare’s funeral (LegCl 47-48).

The Tavola of Saint Clare of Assisi is a visual hagiography and is used for preaching about Clare’s life of holiness.



Basilica of Saint Clare of Assisi  
Assisi, Italy

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