

Letter for the VIII Centenary of the Birth of Saint Clare of Assisi

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Clare identified with poor Christ

In the Umbrian town of Assisi 800 years ago a child named Clare was born to Favarone di Offreduccio and his wife Ortolana. The family of Poor Clares and all the Franciscan families began the celebration of a special jubilee year in her honour on 11 August, the feast of St Clare; celebrations will continue until 4 October 1994, the feast of St Francis of Assisi. To commemorate the anniversary the Holy Father sent a letter to the Poor Clare; the following is a translation from the Italian.

Dear Cloistered Sisters,

1. Eight hundred years ago, Clare of Assisi was born to the nobleman, Favarone di Offreduccio.

This "new woman", as the Ministers General of the Franciscan families wrote of her in a recent letter, lived as a "little plant" in the shadow of St Francis, who led her to the heights of Christian perfection. The celebration of such a truly evangelical creature is meant most of all to be an invitation to rediscover contemplation, that spiritual journey which only the mystics experience deeply. To read her ancient biography and her writings- "Form of Life", her Testament, and the four extant letters of the many she wrote to St Agnes of Prague- means being so immersed in the mystery of the triune God and of Christ, the incarnate Word, as to be dazzled. Her writings are so marked by the love stirred up in her by her loving, prolonged gazing upon Christ the Lord that it is not easy to express what only a woman's heart could experience.

2. Clare's contemplative journey, which will culminate in her vision to the "King of glory" (Proc IV,19), begins precisely in her total abandonment to the Spirit of the Lord, in the same way as Mary did at the annunciation: that is to say, it begins with that spirit of poverty (cf. Lk 1:48) which empties her of everything but the simplicity of a gaze fixed on God.

For Clare, poverty- which she loved so much and mentioned so often in her writings- is the wealth of the soul which, stripped of its own goods, is open to the "Spirit of the Lord and his holy manner of working" (cf RCI X,10), like an empty shell in which God can pour out an abundance of his gifts. The Mary- Clare parallel appears in St Francis' earliest writing, in the *Forma vivendi* he gave to Clare: "By divine inspiration you have made yourselves daughters and servants of the Most High King, the heavenly Father, and have taken the Holy Spirit as your spouse, choosing to live according to the perfection of the Holy Gospel". (*Forma vivendi*, in RCI VI ,3).

The Spirit creates an image of God's Son in the Christian

Clare and her sisters are called "spouses of the Holy Spirit": and expression not common in the Church's history, in which a sister, a nun, is always described as the "spouse of Christ". However, here we have the resonance of some expressions from Luke's account of the annunciation (cf Lk1:26-38), which become key words for expressing Clare's experience: the "Most High", the "Holy Spirit", the "Son of God", "the handmaid of the Lord" and lastly that "over-shadowing" which for Clare is her investiture, when her hair was shorn and fell at the foot of our Lady's altar in the Portinuncle, "before her bridal chamber, as it were" (cf LegCI 8).

3. "The Spirit of the Lord and his holy manner of working", which is given to us in Baptism, is that of creating in a Christian the image of the Son of God. In solitude and silence, which Clare chooses as a form of life for herself and her sisters within the most poor walls of her monastery half-way between Assisi and the Portiuncula, the curtain of smoke of words and earthly things fades away, and communion with God becomes a reality: love which is born and which gives of itself.

Clare, bowed down in contemplating the Infant of Bethlehem, exhorts us: Since this vision "is the splendour of eternal glory, the brilliance of eternal light and the mirror without blemish, gaze upon that mirror each day Look at ... the poverty of him who was placed in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes. O marvellous humility! O astonishing poverty! The King of angels, the Lord of heaven and earth, is laid in a manger" (4Lag 14, 19-21).

She did not even notice that through her contemplation and transformation, her womb as a consecrated and "poor virgin" attached to the "poor Christ" (cf 2Lag 18) had become a cradle of the Son of God (Proc IX, 4). It is the voice of this Child which, at a time of great danger-when the monastery was about to fall into the hands of Sacracen troops in the employ of Emperor Frederick II –reassures her from the Eucharist: It "will be defended by my protection" (LegCl22).

On Christmas eve in 1252, the Child Jesus bore Clare far away from her bed of illness and love, which knows neither time nor place, and enveloped her in a mystical experience which immersed her in the infinite abyss of God.

4. If Catherine of Siena is the saintly woman full of passion for the Blood of Christ, the great St Teresa is the woman who goes from "mansion" to "mansion" to the threshold of the great King in the Interior Castle and Therese of the Child Jesus is the one who, in Gospel simplicity, travels the little way, Clare is the *passionate lover of the poor, crucified Christ*, with whom she wants to identify absolutely.

Clare fixed her eyes on the poor and crucified Christ

She puts it thus in one of her letters: "Look upon him who became contemptible for you, and follow him, making yourself contemptible in this world for him. Your Spouse, though more beautiful than the children of men, became for your salvation the lowest of men, was despised, struck, scourged untold times throughout his entire body, and then died amid the suffering of the cross ... Gaze upon him, consider him, contemplate him, as you desire to imitate him. If you suffer with him, you shall rejoice with him; if you die with him on the cross of tribulation, you shall possess heavenly mansions in the splendour of the saints, and in the Book of Life your name shall be called glorious among men" (2 Lag 19-22).

Clare, who entered the monastery when she was but 18 years of age, died there at the age of 59, after a life of suffering, of constant prayer, strict observance and penance. Because of this "ardent desire for the poor, crucified Christ", nothing burdened her, to the point that at the end of her life she could say to Brother Raynaldo, who assisted her "in the long martyrdom of so many illnesses", that: "After I once came to know the grace of my Lord Jesus Christ through his servant Francis, no pain has been bothersome, no penance too severe, no weakness, dearly beloved brother, has been hard" (LegCl 44).

5. But the one who suffers on the cross is he who reflects the Father's glory and sweeps away in his Passover those who loved him to the point of sharing his suffering out of love for him.

The delicate 18-year-old who, fleeing home on the night of Palm Sunday 1212, set off without hesitation on the adventure of a new experience, believing in the Gospel as Francis showed her, and in nothing else, with the eyes of her body and of her heart totally immersed in the poor and crucified Christ, experiences this union which transforms her. "Place your mind before the mirror of eternity", she writes to Agnes of Prague. "Place your soul in the brilliance of glory! Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance! And transform your entire being into the image of the Godhead itself through contemplation, so that you too may feel what his friends feel as they taste the hidden sweetness that God himself has reserved from the beginning for those who love him. Since you have cast aside all (those) things which, in this deceitful and turbulent world, ensnare their blind lovers, love him totally who gave himself totally for your love" (3LAg 12-15).

Thus the hard bed of the cross becomes the sweet nuptial bed and the "life-long recluse of love" finds the most passionate accents of the beloved in the Song of Songs: "Draw me after you ... O heavenly Spouse! I will run and not tire, until you bring me into the wine-cellar" (4LAg 30-31).

Enclosed in the monastery of San Damiano, in a life marked by poverty, hard work, tribulation and illness, as well as a fraternal communion so intense that, in the language of the "Form of Life", it could be described as "holy unity" (RCI, Bull of Innocent IV,2), Clare experiences the purest joy experienced by any creature; the joy of living in Christ the perfect union of the three divine Persons, entering as it were into the ineffable circuit of Trinitarian love.

Clare offered everything to the Father in union with Christ

6. Clare's life, under the guidance of Francis, was not an eremitic life, even though it was contemplative and cloistered. Around her, wanting to live like the birds of the air and the lilies of the field (Mt 6:26,28), gathered the first group of sisters, for whom God alone sufficed. This "little flock" which rapidly expanded – by August 1228 there were at least 25 monasteries of "Poor Clares" (cf Letter of Cardinal Raynaldo; *Archivium Franciscanum Historicum* 5, 1912, pp. 444-446) – had no fear (cf. Lk 12:32). The faith was the reason for their peaceful security in the face of every danger. Clare and her sisters had hearts as big as the world: as contemplatives, they interceded for the whole of humanity. Those souls that were sensitive to the daily problems of each person were able to take all difficulties upon themselves; there was no concern, suffering, anguish or discouragement of others which did not find echo in the hearts of these prayerful women. Clare cried and pleaded with the Lord for her beloved city of Assisi when it was under siege by the troops of Vitale of Aversa, obtaining the city's liberation from war; every day she prayed for the sick and often healed them with a sign of the cross. Convinced that there can be no apostolic life unless it is immersed in the open side of Christ crucified, she wrote to Agnes of Prague in the words of St Paul: "I consider you a coworker of God himself (cf Rom 16:3) and a support of the weak members of his ineffable Body" (3LAg 8).

7. Due to a type of iconography which has been very popular since the 17th century, Clare is often depicted holding a monstrance. This gesture recalls, although in a more solemn posture, the humble reality of this woman who, although the silver ciborium containing the Eucharist (cf Legcl 21), which she had placed in front of the refectory door that the Emperor's troops were about to storm. Clare lived on that

pure Bread which, according to the custom of the time, she could receive only seven times a year. On her sickbed she embroidered corporals and sent them to the poor churches in the Spoleto valley.

In reality Clare's whole life was a *eucharist* because, like Francis, from her cloister she raised up a continual "thanksgiving" to God in her prayer, praise, supplication, intercession, weeping, offering and sacrifice. She accepted everything and offered it to the Father in union with the infinite "thanks" of the only-begotten Son, the Child, the Crucified, the risen One, who lives at the right hand of the Father.

During this jubilee year, dear sisters, the whole Church's attention is turned with growing interest to the shining figure of your beloved mother. With how much greater fervour should you look to her in order to draw encouragement from her example and intensify your effort to respond to the Lord's grace with daily dedication and that commitment to the contemplative life from which the Church draws so much strength for her missionary activity in today's world!

May Christ, our Lord, be your light and the joy of your hearts.

With these wishes, as a sign of my deep affection, I impart a special Apostolic Blessing to all.

From the Vatican, 11 August, the liturgical memorial of St Clare of Assisi, in the year 1993, the fifteenth of my Pontificate.