

Fulfil your vocation in a “spousal dimension”

L'OSSERVATORE ROMANO N.36 - 3 SEPTEMBER 2003

On the 750th anniversary of the death of St. Clare of Assisi

On 11 August, for the 750th Anniversary of the death of St. Clare of Assisi, the Holy Father sent a Message to the Poor Clares throughout the world. St. Clare, faithful follower of St. Francis and foundress of the Poor Clares, strove to live the way of “highest poverty” in following the Son of God, “involving every aspect of the human experience, to the very stripping of the Cross”. The Holy Father encouraged the Poor Clares to continue to follow their Rule which, after 750 years since its Pontifical approval, retains all its “spiritual fascination and its theological richness” and becomes a “highway to follow without compromises or concessions to the spirit of the world”. St. Clare’s example shows us that constant prayer leads to an authentically contemplative life, “opening wide the heart to Spirit of the Lord, which transforms the whole person”. The following is a translation of the Holy Father’s Message, which was written in Italian and signed on 9 August.

Dearest Sisters,

1. The 11th August 1253 marked the end of the earthly pilgrimage of St. Clare of Assisi, disciple of St. Francis and foundress of your Order, known as the Poor Sisters or Poor Clares, that today counts, in its various branches, around 900 monasteries scattered over the five continents. Seven hundred and fifty years from her death, the commemoration of this great Saint continues to be keenly felt in the hearts of the faithful; I am pleased on this occasion to send to your religious Family a cordial thought and an affectionate greeting.

On such an important jubilee commemoration, St. Clare urges all to understand in a much deeper way the value of the vocation, which is a gift given from God, intended to bear fruit. Concerning this, she wrote in her Testament: “Among the other gifts that we have received and do daily receive from our benefactor, the Father of mercies, and for which we must express the deepest thanks to the glorious Father of Christ, there is our vocation, for which, all the more by the way of its being more perfect and greater, do we owe the greatest thanks to Him. Therefore, the Apostle [writes]: ‘Know your vocation.’” (2-4)

Vocation of St. Clare: virgin, spouse, mother

2. Born in Assisi between the years 1193-1194 of the noble family Di Favarone of Offreduccio, St. Clare received, especially from her mother Ortolana, a solid Christian education. Illuminated by divine grace, she let herself be drawn to the new form of evangelical life initiated by St. Francis and his companions, and decided, in her turn, to embark on a more radical following of Christ. She left her father’s house during the night between Palm Sunday and the Monday of Holy Week of 1211 (or 1212), and following the advice of the Saint himself she went to the small church of the Portiuncula, heart of the Franciscan experience, where in front of the altar of the Blessed Virgin Mary she divested herself of all her riches, to be reclothed in the poor habit of penance in the form of a cross.

After a brief period of searching, she came to rest in the small monastery of St. Damian, where her younger sister Agnes followed her soon after. Here other companions joined her, desiring to incarnate the Gospel in a contemplative dimension. The determination with which the new monastic community followed in the footprints of Christ, considering poverty, hard work, tribulation, humility and contempt of the world as great spiritual joys, moved St. Francis to write to them with fatherly affection: “Because by divine inspiration you have made yourselves daughters and servants of the Most High King, he heavenly Father, and have espoused yourselves to the Holy Spirit, choosing to live according to the perfection of the Holy Gospel, I resolve and promise for

myself and for my brothers to always have that same loving care and solicitude for you as [I have] for them" (*Form of Life of Clare of Assisi*, Chapter VI 3-4).

3. Clare put these words in the central chapter of her Rule, regarding them not only as one of the teachings received from the Saint, but as the fundamental nucleus of his charism, which emerges in the Trinitarian and Marian context of the Gospel of the Annunciation. In fact, St. Francis placed the vocation of the Poor Sisters in the aura of the Virgin Mary, the humble handmaid of the Lord who, overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, became the Mother of God. The humble servant of the Lord is the prototype of the Church, Virgin, Spouse and Mother.

Clare perceived her vocation as a call to follow the example of Mary, who offered her own virginity to the action of the Holy Spirit to become the Mother of Christ and of His Mystical Body. She felt closely united to the Mother of the Lord and because of this, urged St. Agnes of Prague, the Bohemian princess who became a Poor Clare: "May you cling to his most sweet Mother who gave birth to a Son whom the heavens could not contain, and yet, she carried Him in the little enclosure of her holy womb, and held him on her virginal lap" (*Third Letter to Agnes of Prague*, 18-19).

The figure of Mary accompanied the vocational walk of the Saint of Assisi until the end of her life. According to a noteworthy testimony given at the Process of Canonisation, Our Lady approached Clare on her deathbed, bending over her, whose life was a radiant image of Her own.

The 'highest poverty': prerogative of the Poor Clares

4. Only Clare's exclusive option for Christ crucified, undertaken with ardent love, can explain the determination with which she advanced along the way of "highest poverty", and expression that contains in its meaning the experience of renouncement the Son of God lived in the Incarnation. With the specification "highest", Clare desired to express in some way the humble abasement of the Son of God, which filled her with wonder. She noted: "...so great and good a Lord, then, on coming into the Virgin's womb, chose to appear despised, needy and poor in this world, so that people, who were in utter poverty, want and absolute need of heavenly nourishment, might become rich in Him by possessing the kingdom of heaven" (*First Letter to Agnes of Prague*, 19-20). She grasped this poverty in the entire earthly experience of Jesus, from Bethlehem to Calvary, where the Lord "remained naked on the cross" (*Testament of St. Clare*, 45).

To follow the Son of God, who became our path, meant for her no other desire than to be submerged with Christ in the experience of a humility and of a radical poverty, involving every aspect of the human experience, to the very stripping of the Cross. For St. Clare the choice of poverty was a requirement for Gospel fidelity, to the extent that she resolved to ask the Pope for a "privilege of poverty", that was a prerogative of the form of monastic life she began. She inserted this "privilege", tenaciously defended throughout her life, into the Rule that received Papal confirmation two days before her death with the Bull *Solet Annuere* of 9 August 1253, 750 years ago.

5. Clare's gaze remained fixed on the Son of God to the end, in ceaseless contemplation of his mysteries. Hers was the loving gaze of the spouse, filled with the desire of an evermore complete sharing. She was immersed particularly in the meditation of the Passion, contemplating the mystery of Christ, who from the heights of the Cross called her and drew her [to him]. Thus, she wrote: "'All you who pass by the way, look and see if there is any suffering like my suffering!' Let us respond with one voice, with one spirit, to Him, crying and grieving, Who said: *Remembering you over and over makes my soul perish within me*" (*Fourth Letter to Agnes of Prague*, 25-26). And she urged: "Let yourself be inflamed more strongly with the fervour of charity!... And sigh... in the great desire of your heart... may you cry out: *Draw me after you... O Heavenly Spouse!*" (*Testament of St. Clare of Assisi*, 27, 29-32).

This full communion with Christ's mystery introduced her into the experience of the indwelling of the Trinity, wherein the soul matures in greater awareness of God's dwelling within her: "Since the heavens and the rest of creation cannot contain their Creator and only the faithful soul is His

dwelling place and throne, and this only through the charity that the wicked lack" (*Third Letter to Agnes of Prague*, 22-23).

Unity and fraternity: fruit of mature contemplative experience

6. Guided by Clare, the community gathered in St Damian chose to live according to the form of the holy Gospel in the cloistered, contemplative dimension of "living together in unity of mind and heart in a special way (*Form of life of Clare of Assisi*, 1). According to a "manner of holy unity" (*ibid.*, 2). Clare's particular understanding of the value of unity in the fraternity seems to be founded in a mature contemplative experience of the Trinitarian Mystery. Authentic contemplation, in fact, does not close in on self, but fulfils the truth of being one in the Father, in the Son, and in the Holy Spirit. In her Rule, Clare not only based the fraternal life on its values of reciprocal service, of participation and of sharing, but made it her concern that the community would be also firmly built on the "unity of mutual love and peace" (Chapter IV, 22), and also that the Sisters would be "eager to conserve among themselves the unity of mutual love which is the bond of perfection" (Chapter X, 7).

Indeed, she was convinced that reciprocal love edifies the community and gives rise to vocational maturation, and she urged in her Testament: "Loving one another with the charity of Christ, may the love you have in your hearts be shown outwardly in your deeds so that, compelled by such an example, the Sisters may always grow in love of God and in charity for one another" (59-60).

7. Clare also perceived this value of unity in its broader dimension: and so, she willed that the cloistered community be fully inserted into the Church and solidly anchored to it with the bond of obedience and filial subjection (cf. *Form of Life*, Chapter I, XII). She clearly understood that the life of the cloistered nuns was to be a model for the other Sisters called to follow the same vocation, as well as a shining witness for those living in the world.

The 40 years lived inside the small monastery of St Damiano did not narrow the horizons of her heart, but expanded her faith in the presence of God, working out salvation in history. There are two episodes in which, with the strength of her faith in the Eucharist and with the humility of prayer, Clare succeeded in freeing the city of Assisi and the monastery from the danger of an imminent destruction.

Fidelity without compromises or concessions to the spirit of the world

8. How can we not emphasize that 750 years since Pontifical approval, the Rule of St Clare maintains intact its spiritual fascination and its theological richness? The perfect consonance of human and Christian values, the wise harmony of contemplative fervour and evangelical rigour makes it for you, dear Poor Clares of the Third Millennium, a highway to follow, without compromises or concession to the spirit of the world.

To each of you Clare directs the words that she left to Agnes of Prague: Happy indeed is she to whom it is given to share in this sacred banquet so that she might cling with all her heart to Him whose beauty all the blessed hosts of heaven unceasingly admire" (*Fourth Letter to Agnes of Prague*, 9).

The centennial anniversary offers you the opportunity to reflect on your vocation's specific charism as Poor Clares. A charism that is characterized, in the first place, *by a call to live according to the perfection of the Holy Gospel*, with a decided reference to Christ, the only and authentic programme of life. Is this not a challenge for the men and women of today? It is an alternative proposal to the dissatisfaction and superficiality of the contemporary world, which often seems to have lost its very identity, because it is no longer aware that it has been created by God's Love and is awaited by him in eternal communion.

You, dear Clares, fulfil *in a spousal dimension* the following of the Lord, renewing the mystery of the fertile virginity of the Virgin Mary, Spouse of the Holy Spirit, the perfect woman. May the presence of your monasteries entirely devoted to the contemplative life be also today a "memory of the Church's spousal love" (*Verbi Sponsa*, 1), filled with the consuming desire of the Spirit that incessantly implored the coming of Christ the Spouse (cf. Rev. 22:17). Given the need for a renewed commitment to holiness, St Clare offers at the same time an example of that *teaching of*

holiness that, nourished by incessant prayer, leads to becoming contemplatives of the Face of God, opening wide the heart to the Spirit of the Lord, which transforms the whole person, mind, heart and action, according to the exigencies of the Gospel.

The world needs to experience God through you

9. My most heartfelt wish, strengthened by prayer, is that your monasteries may continue to offer to today's world, with its widespread need for spirituality and prayer, the demanding proposal of a complete and authentic experience of God, One and Triune, by radiating his loving and saving presence.

May Mary, the Virgin of Listening, assist you. May St Clare and all the Saints and Blesseds of your Order intercede for you.

I assure a cordial remembrance for you, dear Sisters, for all who share together with you in the grace of this meaningful jubilee, and to all I impart from the heart a special Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 9 August 2003

Joannes Paulus II