

## **St Clare – a model saint - by Pat O’Leary**

Every year countless thousands of people throughout the world – a large majority of whom are young people – join with the 18,000 or so Poor Clare nuns in celebrating the feast day of one of the ‘loveliest’ saints of the Church – St Clare of Assisi.

This great Franciscan saint has a particular lure and appeal for young people, and although she was almost 60 years old when she died, Clare is somehow always looked upon as a young saint – the beautiful golden-haired 18-year-old who gave up all her worldly goods, her social standing, her family and friends to follow the ‘simple, poor, enclosed Gospel way of life’ outlined by her guide and counsellor, St Francis of Assisi.

I spoke recently about young people today very much in need of models whom they can imitate. They could not possibly find anyone better than the saints of the Church. The late John Paul II was consistently pointing to the importance of the saints as models for our age, Pope Benedict also affirms this.

But the saints seem to have slipped back in popularity in peoples’ minds, that is, unless they are known specifically for ‘finding things’ or whatever. But every saint has been given a special gift for use in the Church. Each has their own special mission to help us find the road to heaven.

In 1958 when Pope Pius XII was looking for an appropriate patron saint for the then budding worldwide television network, he chose Clare of Assisi as patron saint of this vitally important communications medium. Clare, whose name means ‘clear shining’ had been synonymous with ‘light’ throughout her life. Before her birth, her mother, Ortolana, recounts that she heard a voice saying that she would give birth to a great light which would illuminate the world.

In relation to her being chosen as patron saint of television, it is said that one day when she was sick and confined to bed she was able to follow in an interior vision the entire Mass being celebrated in the basilica in Assisi.

Speaking in Assisi in 1982, Pope John Paul II said: “In our age, it is necessary and important for the life of the Church to repeat the discovery of St Clare; it is vital to rediscover that charisma, that vocation. It is necessary to rediscover the divine legend of Francis and Clare.” On that occasion the Pope pointed out that it is truly difficult to separate the two Franciscan founders: “These two phenomena, these two legends, Francis and Clare. There is something very profound, which cannot be understood outside the criteria of Franciscan, Christian, Gospel spirituality,” he said.

St Clare was born in 1194 into a family of the nobility in Assisi. Her father Favarone di Offreduccio, a soldier knight, was a man of wealth and importance in the city. Her mother, Ortolana Fiumi, is described as a devout Christian lady.

Many stories are told about her reputation for kindness to the poor, even as a young child and also about her piety. “She exercised those gestures of humility of the noble and courtly ideal, exemplified, for example, by Lancelot, ‘the little servant’ who sought his Lady with both heroic and humble deeds.”

After hearing St Francis preaching, Clare was drawn to imitate the way of life he had chosen to follow. She left home by stealth on the night of Palm Sunday, March 18,

1212 together with a companion and, in the dead of night, Francis received her consecration to God before the altar of the Blessed Virgin at the little church in Assisi.

She lived out her life of prayer and sacrifice throughout the following 40 years until her death on August 11, 1253 in the monastery of San Damiano in Assisi. Many of her companions were inspired to join her, as did her sister, Catherine – Sister Agnes – and ultimately her mother.

The Crucifix of San Damiano, that allegedly 'spoke' to Francis, bidding him to "go and repair my Church that is falling into ruin", had also announced that arrival of ladies, who would live in the church and monastery that Francis was restoring. This prophecy was recounted later by Clare in her Testament.

One of the most powerful stories we have of Clare shows her tremendous devotion to Christ in the Eucharist. In 1240 when Assisi was in danger from the troops of Frederick, Clare took the monstrance containing the Blessed Sacrament from the convent of San Damiano and courageously challenged the converging army. The troops fled and the city was saved. This is the image we most frequently associated with St Clare ever since.

She wrote her own Rule and asked Pope Innocent III for the "privilege of poverty".

Clare states clearly in her Testament what her own vocation and that of her sisters, would be: It would be a vocation to fraternity, to living together with other sisters; to be, in the Church and for the Church "an example and a mirror" of the Lord and of his Mother, in this way repairing (renovating) his house.

At the end of her life after twenty-eight years of sickness, she wrote: "From the time that I recognised the grace of my Saviour Jesus Christ, through his servant, Francis, no suffering ever caused me grief, no penance was too heavy, no illness too severe..."

We need to spread the word about this lovely saint to today's young people. For she could not fail to attract them to her beloved Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.