

## The Poor Clare Order

On the night of Palm Sunday 1212, Clare – eighteen, young and noble – fled from the Offreduccio family home in Assisi with a trusted companion, to the little church of the Portiuncula where she was met by Francis and his early Friars. Here, before the altar in this, the Mother Church of the Friars Minor, Francis cut her golden tresses and she exchanged her elegant robes for a simple tunic tied about the waist with just a cord. Having remained but a short time with the Benedictine community where Francis had placed her, she moved on to San Damiano and there, with her companions she remained until the end of her life.

She committed herself in total surrender to the Lord of the Gospel, as a spouse of Christ, wholly caught up in the poverty of the One she loved. What her contemplative gaze discovered in Christ was enough to indicate the path she was to follow. She chose the cloistered, contemplative life, lived within enclosure for herself and her Sisters.

Unlike her great Benedictine and Cistercian contemporaries, who followed the Rule of St. Benedict, Clare marked out the path for her Sisters by a Rule, which she herself wrote.

Highest Poverty, in imitation of the poverty of Christ and His Blessed Mother, she saw as a Gift and Privilege central to her ideal of Gospel living. Many came to join her and so the Order spread rapidly. Over 100 Monasteries were founded even in her own lifetime.

To understand the contemplative vocation in its essence is to know that its apostolate is both universal and timeless. Withdrawal from the world becomes life giving on behalf of the whole Church. Our call to enclosure is a call to intimacy with God, with Jesus. Enclosure provides the atmosphere that allows one to offer one's whole being to Jesus as a living dwelling place. This wholehearted fidelity to the hidden life bears the fruits of genuine apostolate for the whole world. The Poor Clares constitute the SECOND ORDER of the great Franciscan family and at present number almost 20,000 members spread throughout all continents. This includes many Monasteries in both Britain and Ireland.

Poor Clares take Vows of Chastity, Poverty, Obedience and Enclosure. Our day centres on the Eucharist. Holy Mass and Eucharistic Adoration, either daily or perpetual is a precious heritage of our Order. The Liturgy of the Hours – Divine Office – is celebrated in Choir seven times each day. At midnight the Sisters rise to celebrate Matins – the Night Office – and spend some time in Adoration. Prayer is the golden thread which permeates and sanctifies the activities of the entire day. The Sisters also engage in manual work: vestment making, altar breads, music and art work, are some of the many works that make up our day, coupled, of course, with household chores which at all times claim our attention. Outdoors, too, there is work to be done in both flower and vegetable gardens. So a balance rhythm of prayer and work punctuates our day. Space is allowed also for periods of Mental Prayer and Scripture Reading or Lectio Divina, that quiet pondering of the Scriptures.

Penance is a necessary feature of a life that is poor – fasting, perpetual abstinence, night rising and sandaled feet – but it is a penance that is joyful and sets free, a penance that combines solitude and togetherness in the warmth of the Franciscan family spirit. Our life style is simple and uncluttered by the luxuries of modern life.

Pope John Paul II has shown his appreciation and affection for the contemplative Orders many times: “Never was the contemplative vocation more relevant or more precious, than in our modern restless world... when the future of the church and humanity depends on Prayer.” In May 1993, he invited the Poor Clares to establish a Monastery in the Vatican State – Mater Ecclesia. It is the Holy Father’s wish that all contemplative Orders come there in turn for a period of five years.

Our Monasteries are beacons of hope for the many who come daily to share with us their burdens and cares, which weigh heavily on them. They leave us refreshed and strengthened in the knowledge that we travel with them. Others, too, come to join with us in prayer, such as Mass or the Liturgy of the Hours.

In her Testament, St. Clare says: “Among the graces we have received and continue daily to receive, the greatest of all is our vocation.” Through the centuries countless Sisters have responded to this vocation and have graced the Church with lives of great sanctity – many are canonised Saints and Blesseds.

We, who today follow this privileged vocation, extend the challenge to young women whom the Lord may be calling:

“COME FOLLOW ME.”

It is indeed the “Pearl of great price” spoken of in the Gospels.