

Saint Clare Of Assisi: A Mother And Model For All Franciscans

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Saint Clare of Assisi begins her *Testament* with these words: “In the name of the Lord. Amen! Among the other gifts that we have received and do daily receive from our benefactor, *the Father of mercies* (2 Corinthians 1:3), 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 way of its being more perfect and greater, do we owe the greatest thanks to Him. The Son of God has been made for us *the Way* (cf. John 14:6), which our blessed father Francis, His true lover and imitator, has shown and taught us by word and example” (*Testament of St. Clare* 1-3, 5).

Perhaps you have been a Secular Franciscan for awhile, or perhaps you are discerning whether or not the Lord is calling *you* to live our way of life, to follow the *Rule of Life* given to us by the Church “to observe the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by following the example of Saint Francis of Assisi, who made Christ the inspiration and center of his life with God and people” (Article #4, *Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order*). Since we have been called to follow Jesus in the footsteps of Saint Francis, you may be wondering why this reflection on Saint Clare has been written. I hope that a response to this question may become apparent for you as this brief reflection unfolds.

Available today are many well-done biographies of Saint Clare as well as critical editions of her writings and a number of books which explore essential aspects of her spirituality and spiritual legacy within the Franciscan tradition. Father Benet Fonck, O.F.M., begins the introduction to one such work with these words:

The whole worldwide Franciscan Family has concluded its celebration of the 800th anniversary (1993 – 1994) of the birth of St. Clare of Assisi, the co-founder of the Franciscan Movement and mother of the nuns of the Second Order of St. Francis (Poor Clares). Clare, who calls herself “a handmaid of Christ” and “a little plant of our holy Father Francis” (*Testament of St. Clare* 5; *Rule of St. Clare* 1:3), is considered the feminine incarnation of the evangelical life in the Franciscan tradition and the paradigmatic traveling companion and sister pilgrim on the journey toward holiness for the members of this worldwide spiritual family in the Church. . . . **As much as St. Francis** [emphasis added], Clare of Assisi is the model, mirror, and mentor of Franciscan living. (Fonck, 1996, p. ix)

Father Benet’s words serve to bring Saint Clare’s importance to us into proper focus. While it would be historically inaccurate to refer to Saint Clare as the co-founder of the Secular Franciscan Order *per se*, she is certainly the co-founder of the broader Franciscan Movement of which the O.F.S. is a valued and indispensable portion. And while Saint Clare is technically the mother only of the Poor Clares within the Franciscan Family, there are few if any Franciscans today who would take issue with us if we were to call upon Clare as our *spiritual* mother. Some of her biographers make explicit mention of Tertiaries (as Secular Franciscans were known in those days) having visited Clare at San Damiano as some of the friars did. Therefore, it seems entirely reasonable for us to assume that, although Clare lived an enclosed life with her sisters at San

Damiano, at least some of the Brothers and Sisters of Penance (also an early name for us) sought her spiritual advice and counsel as well as the powerful intercession of her prayers from time to time.

Historically and for a variety of reasons, the central role played by Saint Clare in the development and unfolding of the Franciscan story was not always recognized or celebrated. This sad fact of our history changed, however, with the advent of Franciscan scholarship which has unlocked for us the treasury of Clare's writings and spirituality. A major impetus for this development was the 1993-1994 observance throughout the Franciscan world of the eighth centenary of Saint Clare's birth. Many authors and scholars have especially made Clare and her ideals available to us; a representative listing is included at the end of this article. The introductions to any of these works will provide you with a good background of what is known about the life of Saint Clare and her important place within the Franciscan Family. I strongly recommend that you include some reading about the life, writings, and spirituality of Saint Clare of Assisi as a part of your discernment as well as your Franciscan formation, both initial and ongoing.

Ask any Franciscan what most impresses her or him about Saint Clare and you are likely to receive as many different replies as people you ask! For the remainder of this brief reflection on Saint Clare, I would like to share with you my own response to this question, especially with an eye toward offering you my understanding of the way in which she can be a model and mentor of Franciscan Gospel living for us today.

The first outstanding quality of Clare was her capacity to be a great and generous lover of God and of God's people. All that we have learned about Clare testifies to this aspect of her personality. Even as a child (she was probably born in 1194), she evidenced a most passionate love for God which found an outward expression in her sincere compassion for suffering humanity. Her great devotion to our Lord present in the Holy Eucharist (Clare is often pictured holding a monstrance containing the Blessed Sacrament) is further evidence of her love for the Lord. It was to Clare and her community of sisters, the Poor Ladies of San Damiano, that Saint Francis came for care while in the throes of his final illness in 1225-1226. Clare herself was ill for most of her adult life (she died on August 11, 1253). Even in her own infirmity she still sought every possible opportunity to care for her spiritual daughters at San Damiano. She provides us with a concretely realized example of our ability to live the Paschal Mystery of Jesus, that it is in dying to ourselves that we are able to live more fully for God and for others.

A second quality of Saint Clare's life particularly worthy of admiration and imitation was her absolute determination to remain faithful to her ideals as God had made these known to her. Her parents, Favorone di Offreduccio and the Lady Ortolana (her mother would one day join her at San Damiano), would have had her marry at an early age, but she refused all suitors. She knew that her heart belonged to the Lord alone. She defied her parents when she left the family home forever on Palm Sunday 1212 to meet Francis at the Portiuncula (the little chapel of St. Mary of the Angels which Francis had restored) where he cut her golden hair, clothed her in the rough habit of the friars and received her into religious life.



Her strength of spirit and firm determination to remain true to God's will also revealed itself in her life-long struggle to secure from several Popes "the privilege of supreme poverty" for herself and her sisters. It seems that the Cardinal Protectors of the Franciscan Order (Hugolino, Raynaldus) and the Popes themselves (Gregory IX, Innocent IV) loved Clare and her community very much and wanted to make their lives easier for them. But Clare insisted – reverently but firmly – that she must remain faithful to this Gospel ideal of radical dependence on God alone for sustenance, an ideal she shared with Francis and which she largely kept alive in the Franciscan Movement after his death. Clare's *Rule*, which contained her provision about poverty, was officially promulgated by Pope Innocent IV on August 9, 1253, just two days before she was embraced by Sister Death and entered heaven's glory!

A final quality of Saint Clare's life which has always impressed me has been her appreciation of the value of contemplation. In her *Third Letter to Agnes of Prague*, written sometime around the year 1238, Clare wrote: "Place your mind before the mirror of eternity! 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" (cf. Armstrong, 1993, page 45). Most Secular Franciscans are not called to a life of pure contemplation cloistered away from the world and its concerns. Even though our vocation calls us to an active life of living in the world, serving as a leaven of Gospel values to help transform our world after the mind and heart of Christ, we also are to have a contemplative dimension to our spirituality. As our model and exemplar of Franciscan Gospel living, Saint Clare who remained as engaged as she was able in the world of her day can teach us much about being an "active contemplative" in today's world.

I hope that this brief introduction to the life of Saint Clare of Assisi will have whetted your appetite to learn more about this extraordinary woman and her continuing importance in the life of the Franciscan Family and – hopefully – in your own life. In their 1991 letter on Saint Clare (pages 3-4), the four Ministers General of the Franciscan First Order and Third Order Regular recalled the words Pope St. John Paul II spoke on the occasion of his March 1982 visit to the Proto-monastery of the Poor Clares in Assisi. Our Holy Father said: ". . . It is truly difficult to separate these two names, Francis and Clare; these two phenomena, Francis and Clare; these two legends, Francis and Clare . . . There is between them something very profound, which cannot be understood outside the criteria of Franciscan, Christian, Gospel spirituality . . . In the living tradition of the Church, of all Christianity, of humanity, there remains not only the legend. There remains the way in which Francis saw his sister; the way in which he became united to Christ. He saw himself in her image, a bride of Christ, a mystical bride with whom he shaped his holiness. He saw himself as a brother, a poor little man, in the image of the holiness of this authentic bride of Christ, in whom he found the reflection of that perfect bride of the Holy Spirit, Most Holy Mary . . . Here is the place where, for eight centuries, many pilgrims have come to contemplate the divine legend of Clare and Francis together, a legend which has influenced very greatly the life of the Church and the history of Christian spirituality." And so we cannot really come to know Saint Francis without also coming to know Saint Clare who lovingly referred to herself as "his little plant."



May an active and lively love of Saint Clare grow in your heart as you continue your journey in or toward the Franciscan way which is truly a “Franciscarian” way! May her blessing be upon you – and all of us – always:

“In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. May the Lord bless you and keep you. May He show His face to you and be merciful to you. May He turn His countenance to you and give you peace. I, Clare, a handmaid of Christ, a little plant of our holy Father Francis, a sister and mother of you and the other Poor Sisters, although unworthy, ask our Lord Jesus Christ through His mercy and through the intercession of His most holy Mother Mary, of Blessed Michael the Archangel and all the holy angels of God, and of all His men and women saints, that the heavenly Father give you and confirm for you this most holy blessing in heaven and on earth. On earth, may He increase [His] grace and virtues among His servants and handmaids of His Church Militant. In heaven, may He exalt and glorify you in His Church Triumphant among all His men and women saints. I bless you in my life and after my death as much as I can and more than I can with all the blessings with which the Father of mercies has and will have blessed His sons and daughters in heaven and on earth. Amen. Always be lovers of God and your souls and the souls of your Sisters, and always be eager to observe what you have promised the Lord. May the Lord be with you always and, wherever you are, may you be with Him always. Amen!” (cf. Armstrong and Brady, 1982, pages 233-234).



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