

*Place your mind  
before the mirror of eternity  
in the smallness  
of the everyday!  
In the quiet tasks  
of your hands and heart  
find the movement  
of your soul  
in the brilliance of glory!  
Place your heart  
in the substance of divine love,  
your whole being transformed  
into woven light Itself  
through silent contemplation!  
Feel this radiance,  
taste the hidden nectar  
of love held from the beginning  
for those whose hearts break open  
over and over  
in the everyday of things.<sup>1</sup>*

*Clare of Assisi*

## BRILLIANCE

Clare, endowed in a manifold manner with titles of clarity! Before thy conversion (thou were) indeed clear, in thy conversion clearer, in thy comportment in the cloister [in claustrali conversatione] outstandingly clear, and after having run down the space of thy present life thou has begun to shine as most clear! By this Clare a clear mirror of example goes forth to this generation [saeculo]; by this one the lily of virginity is offered among the heavenly amenities; by this one throughout the lands [in terris] are the manifest remedies of interventions [subventionum] sensed. O clarity of blessed Clare to be admired, which as much as it is sought more studiously through individual examples [per singula], so much more splendid is it found among individual examples [in singulis]! This one gleamed [emicuit], I say, in the world [saeculo], in Religion she outshone [praefulsit]; in her house she enlightened [illuxit] as a ray, in the cloister she flashed [pcoruscavit] as lightning. She gleamed in life, after death she irradiates; she was clear on Earth, in the sky she shines back [reluacet]! O how great the vehemence of the light [lumen] of this one and how vehement the illumination of this clarity of hers! This light [lux], indeed, remained enclosed in secret cloisters, and outside it emitted sparkling [micantes] rays; it was gathered together in a strict convent [arcto coenobio], and it was sprinkled upon the entire age [in amplo saeculo]; it was guarded within, and it flowed forth outside. For indeed, Clare lay hidden, but her life lay open; Clare was silent, but her fame shouted out; she was concealed in her cell and she was known among cities. Nor (is it) wonderful; because a light [lucerna] so enkindled, so lightsome [lucens], could not be hidden away so as to not shine [spenderet] and give a clear light in the house of the Lord; nor could a vessel of so many aromatics be put back and not fragrance and resprinkle the Lord's mansion with a sweet odor. Nay, since in the narrow recluse of solitude this one harshly ground down the alabaster of her body, the whole court [aula] of the Church has been filled full in every manner with the odors of her sanctity.<sup>1</sup>

## CLARE OF ASSISI

Courage, boldness, innovation, compassion, humility, endurance; these are the mighty qualities of Clare of Assisi. She called herself the little plant of Francis. While Francis and the Friar Minors traveled the world, living among the poor, Clare and her sisters became the guardians of sacred place.

Francis met Lady Poverty through the gifting of the anonymous leper. Clare met gospel simplicity and truth upon hearing and seeing Francis. At age eighteen she abandoned the way of life prescribed for a young wealthy woman of her time and culture. She gave away her wealth, left her safety behind and fled in the night to meet the friars.

Francis accepted her into their way by cutting her hair and giving her the coarse garments the friars wore. Francis then brought her to a Benedictine convent where she was an impoverished serving maid to the wealthy nuns. Clare was left alone there to defend herself from her angry family, who tried

by force to bring her home. She defied them clinging literally to the altar itself. The friars prepared San Damiano as a home for her and the others who would follow. There were many.

This boldness would accompany Clare long after Francis was dead. She would face down armies in battle, Popes and Bishops, and the preconceived notions of her day. She would become the first woman to write an approved rule for community, a community rooted in the 'privilege of poverty'.

Clare fought for and obtained from Rome the strange Privilege of Poverty, which she felt to be the hidden heart of community. She redefined poverty as an economic relationship to the world, in which we work to give away and in turn receive from the mercy and generosity of others in order to live. Here work is clearly a choice of communion with others. Living becomes a radical affirmation of interdependence on the other; the generosity of an all-embracing divinely charged co-arising universe. This is no avowal of a grinding down poverty that diminishes the human person. Like the celebration of the give away in the great Native American potlatches or the banquet of Wisdom in the Hebrew Testament it is a radical assertion of lavish mutual sharing, the great feast of life.

Clare acted in boldness and commitment to the life of penance, the meaning of which is to turn, to do it another way. Her life and the life of her sisters became rooted not in the conditioning of her world, but in a radical rooting in the great unseen source. This was exemplified for her in the life of Jesus and Francis, a life of doing it another way apart from the cultural mores of time and place. Like Francis she left the illusions of safety to risk the life of simplicity and holy freedom. She is such a challenge!

In the Old Testament the word for penance (shub) means to turn, to return, to restore, to come home, to remember who you really are; a fundamental change in direction, a new way of life. To do penance is to surrender oneself in every aspect of our human existence, to allow ourselves to be remade in an unending process of daily transformation.

Waiting for the holy presence is a quality of being both in action and non-action. Clare guided her community throughout the day in the prayer of the hours, in the work of gardening and baking, in tending the sick; what was there that was not prayer? Where was God not, if he could be found in the tiniest morsel of bread? Their way of life opened in the silence they cultivated, the silence where the heart finally rests in the common labors of the day, present in the silence to the flow of great mystery, the radiance within and among us. These women shared the compassionate life together and with the poor around them.

Clare adjusted to the way of the enclosure, a common form of expression for women religious in the thirteenth century. She could have chosen hermitage or the life of a solitary but instead she chose community. One could feel today, seeing through a modern lens, that this enclosed community might be cut off from life. But these sisters experienced a relationship with their valley below Assisi and with Assisi itself that reminds us of the ancient goddess temples, unceasingly in prayer for harmonious balance and protection of the country and city from which they sprang.

The city of Assisi experienced this concretely in Clare's active intervention in two invasions, her active role in creating family alliances with other cities, the community healing prayers for the city's

protection and for individuals, the community sharing with the poor. In the great round, the people of the city left food and seeds for the sisters.

The very land, garden, space around San Damiano was tended and tilled with love. These many sisters of Clare shared with Francis the experience of union with all beings. They offer us a bold benediction today to risk our security in the collective illusions of separation; to boldly seek union with God, ourselves and one another.

## **COMING INTO SILENCE**

Sit with this beautiful psalm. Read it three times aloud. Then sit quietly for a few minutes allowing words from it to repeat over and over within you allowing yourself to come into silence.

My soul waits for the Lord,  
more than watchmen for the morning.  
More than watchmen for the morning,  
my soul waits for the Lord.  
I have no haughty looks; I am not proud.  
I do not occupy myself with great matters,  
or with things that are too hard for me,  
but I still my soul and make it quite,  
like a child upon its mother's breast;  
my soul is quiet within me.<sup>ii</sup>

## **SOUND**

Inner repetition, sounds, vibrations are like a bell, like a drum vibrating, waking us up to levels of reality, stabilizing us in multiple levels of reality, preparing ourselves and waiting upon the divine.

## **CONTEMPLATION**

### **Silence**

Let the sisters keep silence from the hour of Compline (evening prayer) until Terse (mid-morning prayer), except those who are serving outside the monastery. Let them also continually be silent in the church, the dormitory, and the refectory, only while they are eating. At all times, however they may be permitted to speak with discernment in the infirmary for the recreation and service of the sick. Nevertheless, they may communicate whatever is necessary always and everywhere, briefly and in a low tone of voice.<sup>iii</sup> - from the Rule of Clare of Assisi

## **Peace of the Heart**

In the fullest meaning of the word she was truly his “sister light”. Not only by her advice and prayers, but also by the transparent beauty of her life and her whole being. When everything seemed to be crashing down around Francis, she was the living example of fidelity to his primitive ideal, to pure Gospel simplicity. She lived in God's time, like the stars, “clear, lovely and beautiful.” Without many words she made Francis understand that peace of heart was the highest form of poverty, the peace that comes from total surrender of self to God.<sup>iv</sup> -Eloi Le Clerc

## **On the Privilege of Poverty**

Innocent, Bishop, Servant of the Servants of God, to Our beloved daughters in Christ, Clare and the other handmaids of Christ of the Church of San Damiano in Assisi, to those present and future, having professed the regular life, in perpetuity:

AS HAS BEEN MADE MANIFEST, desiring to be dedicated to God alone, having abdicated the appetite for temporal things; on account of which, having sold all things and paid them out to the poor, you propose to have entirely no possessions, cleaving through all (circumstances) to the footprints of Him, who became poor for our sake, the Way, the Truth and the Life; nor by a proposal of this kind does the want of things terrify you; for the left hand of (your) heavenly Spouse is beneath your head to sustain the infirm things of your body, which you have girt with a charity arranged for a covenant of mind. Then He who feeds the birds of the sky and clothes the lilies of the field, shall not fail to feed and cloth you equally, while He Himself, as He passes by, shall minister unto you in eternity, since, that is, His right Hand shall embrace you more happily in the plenitude of His Vision. Therefore, just as you have supplicated Us, we fortify with apostolic favor your proposal for Most High Poverty, indulging you with the authority of present letters, so that you cannot be compelled by anyone to receive possessions. And if any woman would be unwilling or could not observe a proposal of this kind, let her not have a house with you, but be transferred to another place. We, therefore, decree that to entirely no one of men is it licit to dare perturb or weary by whatever vexations, you or your dwelling...<sup>v</sup> - letter of Innocent III to Clare.

## **The Benediction of Clare**

You don't go to a place of safety.  
There is no safety.  
The earth will reclaim your sorry bones  
with jubilation even in the palace of wealth  
or in the forest of hiding.  
Fear and suffering are everywhere.  
Greet them with bold benediction.  
Like Clare, obedient to her dream,  
gather what you have of sun and earth.  
Lift up that broken bread in the windy field.

I tell you, warriors of death fell  
on their knees in praise.  
The wild grasses danced.<sup>vi</sup>

## Story

- Tell a story of silence and/or sacred space (place) that you have experienced, and how that silence relates to the opening of your heart. If you have not experienced this, tell about the noise within and without you, the activities and ideas that keep you from silence.
- Tell a story about a time you stepped out of the comfort zone of your culture and/or family to do it another way. If you took a step forward today on the pilgrimage of your heart and the old voices of your conditioning rise up, what is the altar to which you would cling to be faithful to your journey?
- Clare could have chosen the solitary life, but instead she chose community. What is more appealing to you?

## Blessing

What you hold, may you always hold. What you do, may you do and never abandon. But with swift pace, light step, unswerving feet, so that even your steps stir no dust, go forward securely, joyfully, and swiftly, on the path of prudent happiness, believing nothing, agreeing with nothing which would dissuade you from this resolution or which would place a stumbling block for you on the way, so that you may offer your vows to the Most High in the pursuit of that perfection to which the Spirit of the Lord has called you.<sup>vii</sup> - Clare of Assisi

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<sup>i</sup> Alexander IV. Clara Claris Praeclara, The Bull of Pope Alexander IV, Bishop servant of the servants of God on the Canonization of St. Clare of Assisi 1255.

<sup>ii</sup> From Psalms 130 and 131, *The New Revised Standard Version Bible*. Oxford University Press, USA. New York 2006.

<sup>iii</sup> Clare of Assisi, The Form of Life for the Poor Sisters (Rule of St. Clare), Chapter 5.

<sup>iv</sup> Le Clerc, Eloi, *Francis of Assisi: Return to the Gospel*, Franciscan Herald Press. Chicago 1983.

<sup>v</sup> Innocent III. The Bull of Pope Innocent III, Bishop servant of the servants of God. In Privilegio Paupertatis. Fundatrici et Clarissis. On the Privilege of Poverty. 1216 CE Textus latinus ex OFM: Provincia Valentiae. <http://www.franciscanos.org/docoficial/privilegio.htm>.

<sup>vi</sup> Flaherty, Barbara. *Holy Madness*. Chanting Press. Anchorage 2006.

<sup>vii</sup> Clare of Assisi. *Second Letter to Agnes of Prague*.