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THE PRAYER LIFE

St. Clare of Assisi

BY ALL ACCOUNTS, she was an attractive and lively girl, smart and strong-willed. Her conversion to religious life culminated one night as she snuck away from her parents' home on the eastern edge of Assisi and joined St. Francis and the friars at Portiuncula, a tiny chapel, down in the valley below town. She was eighteen years old and had spent several years questioning her family's ideas of who she should marry and who she would become. She chose to run away—and run toward—the enigmatic Francis, who had upset the town several years before with his similar conversion.

But just as St. Clare began her religious life dramatically, the next four plus decades saw her spend most of her time in prayer. She was like a mother to her sisters, counseling them on why and how to pray, and helping them with their questions about the spiritual life. She possessed a quiet power that was respected by all who came to know her. She communicated often with popes, cardinals, and women and men around Europe about what it means to be Christian. Clare of Assisi was the most important woman of her day, even though she spent most of her life behind bars.

The bars were known as a grille, which separated St. Clare and her sisters both symbolically and physically from all visitors who would come

to their little convent just outside Assisi. Even the priest who would hear their confessions and administer the sacraments was separated by the grille from the Poor Clares.

It is behind that grille that St. Clare found her true freedom in Christ—a freedom to explore a relationship with God that was unencumbered by societal expectations. She used prayer books, and she memorized many of her prayers. The little book you hold in your hands would probably embarrass her, but she would also understand exactly how to use it.

We pick up prayer books when we realize that we need something to stimulate our devotion to God. For many of us, prayer is our lifeboat, but we still find ourselves treading water from time to time. The unique vision and spiritual depth of St. Clare's prayers and prayer life will open for you new opportunities and paths for knowing God.



St. Clare's prayers are very rarely collected in books. She is often overshadowed by her more famous friend and mentor, St. Francis. Evelyn Underhill once referred to Clare as "the hidden spring" of Franciscan spirituality, an apt description because Clare's wisdom was a spring for Francis and the first generation of Franciscans. It is only in recent years that we have come to discover it.

St. Clare is a different sort of saint from the ones we may be accustomed to spending time with. Her life and spirituality bring to a life of faith something different that is both relevant today and unique among her more famous contemporaries.

By outward appearances, her life was drab compared to the colorful lives of such women as Catherine of Siena and Hildegard of Bingen. Catherine scolded popes and emperors, and Hildegard composed mystical music and theological texts. Both women had a wide range of interests and influence in the world of politics and power, in contrast to Clare, whose life was mostly hidden except to her spiritual brothers and sisters.

St. Clare's stature has also been hampered by the pious descriptions that grew up around her legends. This began with the biography that Thomas of Celano wrote just after her death as part of the process of canonizing her. Every writer since the 1250s has had to make decisions about what is history in Thomas's accounts and what is simply good storytelling in the life of a saint. Many misinterpretations have persisted through the centuries, and sometimes writers have made her sound so pure as to become more angelic than human.

For example, in the early twentieth century, Father Cuthbert wrote these saccharine sentences in his study of St. Clare: "One must be grossly lacking in spiritual perception not to recognize in the story of her life . . . the pure spirituality which

was the atmosphere in which her mind and heart had their being. In her it is evident no ordinary earthliness found place, but all was consecrated by a purity staid with the constant vision and love of the heavenly life.” He would like us to believe that Clare never faced temptation, never doubted her vocation, and that human emotions such as anger, frustration, boredom, and sadness failed to affect her prayer life. The opposite was true, and that is why Clare speaks so profoundly to us today.

Twenty-seven years separated St. Francis’s and St. Clare’s deaths. In other words, she had better than a quarter century to live out the ideals of Francis in her own ways. The two great saints of Assisi shared much in common: They each began their religious lives with dramatic gestures of separation from worldly values and self-conscious identification with the person of Christ—but Clare’s subsequent spirituality became strong, wise, and quiet in ways that differentiate her from her mentor. Where Francis usually sought to jolt people into understanding truth directly and experientially, Clare grew slowly and deeply into wisdom. As a result, it takes more time and patience to learn from Clare than it does from Francis.

St. Clare and her first sisters in religious life were bound by the traditional vow of stability, and in contrast to Francis and the first friars, stability meant a cloistered life. The life of Clare was completely centered in a small community of women

in the former Assisan church of San Damiano. For forty-one years, Clare lived almost every moment of life within the walls of that church-turned-leper hospital-turned-monastery. The prospect of such a circumspect existence has caused one writer to recently refer to San Damiano as “Clare’s *Prison*.” But it wasn’t so.

Despite society’s ideas about the roles of women, who were seen as the “second sex,” inferior to men, St. Clare formed a way of Christian living that was deepened through separation from men and from most of society around her. Spiritual formation went on behind that grille, and it was women transformed who then went out into the world to help the sick, give to the poor, pray for the needs of others, and found new houses for more women to do the same.

St. Francis himself desired that St. Clare spend most of her days within the monastery; he believed that her calling was different from his own. In that era, men and women outside of religious orders did not mingle unless they were married or were blood relatives. Men did not visit with women unless a chaperone was present; men did not even look upon women unless their intentions were clearly stated; and the men and women of the Franciscan movement could not work side by side.

However, in that era when women outside marriage and cloister were usually regarded merely

as temptations to men, St. Clare became a not-so-hidden spring to the men around her: St. Francis and the other friars who came to rely on her after Francis's death, as well as cardinals and even popes. As one contemporary Poor Clare sister has described it, "[Clare's] conscience was formed by a theology which viewed women as embodiments of evil inclined to lust and sensuality." She overcame society's expectations for her and became one of the most important religious leaders of her day.

ST. CLARE AND ST. FRANCIS SIDE BY SIDE

St. Francis of Assisi was peripatetic in his spirituality and in his prayer life. Francis was God's juggler, an innovator, a passionate, creative personality, and these qualities come through in the few descriptions and depictions left to us. He was small, strong, and always on the move. G. K. Chesterton explains:

All his life was a series of plunges and scampers; darting after the beggar, dashing naked into the woods, tossing himself into the strange ship, hurling himself into the Sultan's tent and offering to hurl himself into the fire. In appearance he must have been like a thin brown skeleton autumn leaf dancing eternally before the wind; but in truth it was he that was the wind.

These qualities carried over into St. Francis's life of prayer. In many respects, Francis "made it up as he went along," as one might say today—which is what made the early years of his movement creative and energizing for thousands of converts. We know from that collection of tales, *The Little Flowers*, that in the early days Francis would sometimes gather his followers together and ask them with fervor to open their mouths as the Spirit of God so moved them. Thus was their simple prayer session, composed of the movings of the Spirit as a Quaker meeting might be today. After each had spoken as the Spirit had prompted him, Francis once summarized: "Dear brothers, give thanks to God, who has willed that by the mouths of babes should be revealed the treasures of heavenly wisdom."

In St. Clare's heart were the ideals that made St. Francis's bold actions in the world make sense. As Francis and the friars were walking all over Italy and Europe, Clare and the sisters were deepening the same sense of excitement and enthusiasm, primarily among and within themselves, as well as in their local settings. Many communities of Poor Clares were formed beyond Assisi, including one in Florence headed by Clare's sister Agnes, but Clare always remained put. Clare's depth and constancy of prayer gave rise to an interior life that was different from Francis's and that expresses itself in Clare's prayers. She became known throughout

Italy as a woman of profound wisdom. As the cleric who wrote the papal bull for Clare's canonization explained it, "Clare was concealed, yet her life was revealed; Clare kept silence, yet her reputation cried aloud; she was hidden in a cell, but known throughout the towns."

The spirit of St. Clare's written prayers is as full of joy and charity as St. Francis's, but Clare's prayer life was also more rooted in community and all of its challenges. One imagines that Francis would have been a difficult companion: coming and going at all hours, changing direction and priorities often and at an instant, never thinking about the future. Indeed, he would have made a lousy husband except to Lady Poverty! But Clare was different. She was a deep, ready source of wisdom—a well to Francis's river. Clare developed a form of Franciscan spirituality that was true to the spirit of Francis, while deepening it in various, new directions.

Even the daily work of her hands showed St. Clare as one who brought spiritual strength to others who were more visible. From the first days, every Franciscan was to have manual work of some kind, in addition to prayer and other activities. Behind the walls of San Damiano, Clare's work was embroidery. She embroidered fine altar cloths—the kind that are used during the Mass on the high altar and on which the host is set. This is the sort of work that St. Francis would

have never done himself, but upon which he surely relied. Tradition also has it that Clare created the cloth-shoes for Francis's tender feet after he was blessed with the stigmata.

It was during these extended periods of silence, manual work, and care for the needs of others that St. Clare became famous for intercessory prayer. Her intercessions were highly valued by popes, cardinals, the friars, and St. Francis himself. All of these men would send word to Clare, asking for her intercession and, often, for her received wisdom. She also had a unique ability to bring joy to others. Clare served Francis in this way when he rediscovered the gift of song in her garden at San Damiano. It was the last time that they were together, as Francis stopped for a time at San Damiano on his way to Rieti to see a physician. Clare made a special place for him in her garden, and it was in that place and spirit that Francis broke out of a depression that was ailing him and wrote his famous vernacular song, *Canticle of the Creatures*.

St. Clare was also the first woman to write her own Rule for religious life. Before her—and even for much of her own religious life—men wrote the Rules for women. The Dominican sisters, who were closest to the Poor Clares both geographically and chronologically, had rules against laughing in choir, or making someone else laugh; eating without permission of the abbess; any subtle rebellion in word or deed; and much more.

Penalties for breaking these rules were spelled out in detail. Flogging was common, as was being required to humiliate oneself by eating bread and water while kneeling before the rest of the community. In contrast, Clare's Rule was a disappointment to the disciplinarians. She sent the message to her sisters and to the Church authorities who approve monastic Rules—not that Franciscans were not serious or strict (because Francis and Clare could be both)—but that to be a Franciscan was a decision made each day, voluntarily for Christ. The spiritual life is not a path of renunciations.

St. Clare's life of prayer is perhaps best illuminated by a metaphor of yeast and bread first suggested by Christ in the Gospel of Matthew, and then repeated by Evelyn Underhill a century ago. In *The School of Charity*, Underhill explains:

The leavening of meal must have seemed to ancient men a profound mystery, and yet something on which they could always depend. Just so does the supernatural enter our natural life, working in the hiddenness, forcing the new life into every corner and making the dough expand. If the dough were endowed with consciousness, it would not feel very comfortable while the yeast was working. Nor, as a rule, does our human nature feel very comfortable under the transforming action of God.

Sometimes we don't stand still long enough to know the creative action of God working in us through prayer as yeast works in dough. Clare did.

The "hiddenness" of St. Clare was the very source of her wisdom and strength. Her spirituality is full of subtlety and an understanding of the difficulties of being Christian, but she paves the way for us through the habits of a deliberate life of prayer—one where we don't do all of the work ourselves. It is as if the human body remains the same size just as Christ begins to leaven and take fuller shape within it.

ST. CLARE'S LIFE OF PRAYER

In the legends passed down to us about St. Clare, there are many stories of her prayer life as a child. As with all hagiographical texts, we should take these stories with a slight grain of salt, but nevertheless, they can at least point us in the right direction of understanding how and why and where she prayed.

Modeling St. Clare's *Life* after those of other great saints, Thomas of Celano portrays her childhood as devout, sober, and full of distinction from those around her. We have no stories of Clare that depict her childhood as anything approaching typical; she appears to have been one of those children that is serious from the start. Thomas writes that "she delighted in attending holy prayer

regularly” and “little by little attained a heavenly life.” He compares her to the Desert Fathers and Mothers of ancient Christian tradition when he writes that Clare did not have access to rosary beads as a girl, and so she counted her Our Fathers by casting pebbles aside one by one. She “attached little value to worldly objects,” Thomas explains, and “wore a hair shirt underneath her small, precious clothes.” All of these references are ways that medieval writers would tell the story of one of their contemporaries in the terms of, and with allusions to, the lives of previous saints. In fact, when Thomas writes about Clare on her deathbed, he compares her to the Virgin Mary. He says that the suffering of Clare’s last days was like what Simeon had prophesied to Mary about the Christ Child: “Look, he is destined for the fall and for the rise of many in Israel, destined to be a sign that is opposed—and a sword will pierce your soul too.”

It is in St. Clare’s adolescence that we first come to see who she would become as a woman of God. Unlike the unquestioning child of Thomas of Celano’s early storytelling, Clare shows signs of being a contrarian teenager, full of doubts and questions. There were times when she disobeyed her parents as well as her priest and bishop. Her conversion, in fact, relies on this sort of willful disobedience.

St. Clare did not want to follow the traditional course of a girl from a good family: marriage

and children. She observed the conversion of St. Francis and began listening to the Holy Spirit, who had other plans for her life. How it must have surprised and possibly disappointed her parents when she turned away from what they had planned for her! Clare's conversion—on that first night flight to Portiuncula—actually began the morning beforehand, on Palm Sunday, 1212. That morning, during an elaborate and traditional service with all of Assisi in attendance, Clare distinguished herself from all of the other girls in town by refusing to show herself as an eligible woman waiting for the proper marriage match and blessing. She refused to stand to present herself to the bishop for his blessing, as was the fashion of all unmarried girls in town on that special day. This rebuff would have been felt by her parents, as well, who were probably embarrassed by it. At that point, Clare's tender jaw was surely and firmly set, matching a mind and heart already looking in another direction.

Thus began the religious life of St. Clare. It was the stuff of great films. But then what followed were four, quiet decades of deepening experience in prayer. For Clare, it was necessary to leave the secular world in order truly to live in the spiritual world. The same is not true for all of us, today. For many of us, these spiritual riches are ready and waiting, regardless of where we find ourselves and where we live.

There are other, little details about St. Clare's manners and methods of praying that are helpful to understand at the outset of our own praying with her. For instance, Thomas of Celano tells us that Clare often sought the solitude of praying alone late into the night, after the last evening office of Compline. She cried often while praying, an experience that was not unusual for medieval mystics.

Thomas also explains that St. Clare was like a mother to her spiritual sisters. She would sometimes wake up early and would quietly, through the lighting of the lamps and other more subtle means, arouse the younger sisters to pray with her. On other occasions, Clare would intentionally wake up first and rouse the house by ringing a bell for all of the sisters to come to the first office of prayer. Thomas adds this commentary: "There was no place for timidity, no place for idleness, where a quick reproof prodded lazy souls to prayer and service of the Lord." She acted unreservedly as her sisters' spiritual mother when it came to teaching them about prayer. Similarly, when one of her sisters needed healing, she would lay herself at the sister's feet and attempt to caress away the pain as a good mother might do.

St. Clare also practiced visual meditation, a common practice during the late Middle Ages. We have accounts of her doing this in various ways. At times, she would imagine as she lay

prostrate facedown on the floor that she was kissing Jesus' feet. Later, Thomas says that she meditated on the Cross to such a degree that she felt the devil strike her on the jaw. At another time, she spent twenty-four hours in a meditative state, feeling as if she were nailed to the cross with Christ; she finally had to be roused by one of her sisters at San Damiano, who used Francis's injunction that Clare may not go a day without food of some kind, in order to bring her back to her senses.

In her meditative practices, St. Clare also prayed at times a series of short prayers taught to her by St. Francis called "The Office of the Five Wounds of Christ" (see p. 141). It is easy to imagine Clare visualizing herself with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, determined to stay awake and pray with him, but also crying beside him. She easily would have understood the poignant African-American spiritual "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?"

THE FOUNDATION FOR ST. CLARE'S PRAYERS

St. Clare's life of prayer was built upon a varied foundation. Saints are always constructing on the spiritual work of those saints who have gone before them. For Clare, the building blocks were the teachings of St. Francis, the Old and New Testaments, and the Office of the Feast of St. Agnes of Rome (a fourth-century martyr), whose life and example were meaningful to Clare's understanding of women's spirituality in an age when men so clearly dominated most aspects of everyday life. It was in the spirit of St. Agnes that Clare was fond of quoting from Matthew 13: "The kingdom of Heaven is like treasure hidden in a field which someone has found; he hides it again, goes off in his joy, sells everything he owns and buys the field. Again, the kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls; when he finds one of great value he goes and sells everything he owns and buys it."

The primary sources for understanding the spirituality and prayer life of St. Clare are relatively few. Most important, we have Clare's writings: four letters written to Agnes of Prague (the king of Bohemia's daughter who refused arranged marriages to both Emperor Frederick II and King Henry III of England in order to become a Poor Clare in Prague), and one other

letter to a woman of influence who chose the religious life (Ermentrude of Bruges); Clare's Rule and Testament; and her final blessing, as recorded by Thomas of Celano in the already-mentioned text, *The Legend of St. Clare*. In total, Clare's writings amount to twenty-two pages in the most recent, authoritative edition.

Another essential component to St. Clare's prayer life was the repetition of praying the Divine Office each day. This form of prayer was inherited from ancient Judaism by the first Christians. The Hebrew psalmists were fond of praying what are sometimes called "the hours" at fixed times throughout the day; as Psalm 119 says, "Seven times a day do I praise you." Clare and her sisters were faithful keepers of these *hours*.

St. Clare prayed the Divine Office more regularly than did St. Francis. Francis was committed to praying the hours, in the manner of monks, but his spirituality was also one of continual pilgrimage following Christ, and as such, he sometimes found it difficult to keep to the regularity of the practice. Clare would not have had that problem.

St. Clare was also probably better educated than Francis. We know that her mother was deeply religious herself, sometimes traveling on pilgrimages to major sites in Europe, and we know that Clare's family was wealthy, offering more educational opportunities and more encouragement at home than Francis would have

enjoyed. Her writings show great subtlety as well as a thorough knowledge of Latin. She—and many of her spiritual sisters—would have prayed the Psalter in Latin, its ancient phrases forming the backbone of a religious life. Certain key verses were known by all baptized Christians, even the uneducated, in the same way that nursery rhymes were once known by our parents. Just as a child of the last century might have gone to bed with “I see the moon, and the moon sees me; God bless the moon, and God bless me”—so, too, in Clare’s day, many children would associate phrases from the Psalms with the end of the day: “I will bless the LORD who gives me counsel; my heart teaches me, night after night” (16:7). Similarly, as children a generation ago may have woken up to “Donkey, donkey, old and gray, open your mouth and gently bray. Lift your ears and blow your horn to wake the world this sleepy morn”—children in Clare’s family home would have known “Be joyful in the LORD, all you lands; serve the LORD with gladness and come before his presence with a song” (100:1) as a way to rise in the morning.

Late medieval religious life was rich with the rhythms and phrasings of psalms, and so were St. Clare’s prayers. Psalm 51, for example, was used most every day as a prayer of confession (as it is in the weekly liturgy that follows), and Psalm 8 each Christmas. The Scriptures