

LIGHT IN THE DARK AGES

The Friendship of Francis and Clare of Assisi

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The On-line Study Guide for Book Groups

Chapter 1—Beginnings

1. What caused you to pick up this book? What draws you to the stories of Francis and Clare of Assisi?
2. Is it possible to examine the life of someone like Francis of Assisi without bending the evidence to suit your own conclusions?
3. The most enjoyable, short biography of St. Francis has been G. K. Chesterton's *St. Francis of Assisi* ever since it was first published in 1923. Purchase a copy and read it if you haven't already, and read it again, if you've only read it once. There is no equivalent of an insightful, brief look at the life of St. Clare, but for an easy grasp on her spirituality you may want to try my *The St. Clare Prayer Book*, published by Paraclete Press in 2007.

Chapter 2—About their Relationship

1. Would you think differently about Francis if he had been in love with Clare before their conversions? After their conversions?

2. It is often said that Francis could not have loved God so passionately if he had not first loved life so deeply. Do you think that is true?
3. There have been other notable religious couples since Francis and Clare that loved each other and loved God without being lovers. You may want to look into the other famous St. Francis: St. Francis de Sales and his companion, St. Jane Francis de Chantal.

Chapter 3—To Kiss a Leper

1. What would be the diseases today that would compare to leprosy in the Middle Ages?
2. Francis and Clare admired and imitated the homeliness of Christ through voluntary poverty. Are there any applications for this sort of practice, today?
3. Kenneth Baxter Wolf, a professor at Pomona College in California, has recently argued that Francis's voluntary poverty actually hurt the involuntary poor by deflecting attention away from their plight. Francis, the scholar explains, begged for and received alms that would have otherwise have gone to those who really needed them. Also, he argues, when Francis made voluntary poverty a prerequisite for joining his movement, he necessarily excluded from this special salvation the hopelessly poor who had no choice in the matter of their condition. Although intriguing, these arguments don't really hold up. At every turn,

Francis taught his first followers that their vocation was to relieve the pain and poverty of others, and to bring them the joy of Christ. Neither Francis nor Clare were interested in *acting* like poor people; they sought to become voluntarily poor in ways that would free them to more easily and completely embrace full discipleship to Christ and the community of others. See Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *The Poverty of Riches: St. Francis of Assisi*; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. Do you think this might be true?

Chapter 4—Rebuilding the Church

1. What do you think of the way in which Francis received his first vocation to rebuild churches? Do you believe that God still communicates with people in that very personal sort of way?
2. Medieval men and women could encounter Christ by looking at images. Where do you encounter him?
3. Read chapter 4 of Chesterton's *St. Francis of Assisi*, "Francis the Builder."

Chapter 5—*Who Is My Father?*

1. How has your relationship with a parent or relative affected your faith?
2. Does it make sense to say that in order to come to a mature faith one must be able to challenge the beliefs of one's parents?

3. When is it right to separate from a loved one or friend, rather than reconcile?

Chapter 6—No Frowning Saints

1. Francis wrote a rule for life when he first founded his Order. What would you include in a rule for your life?
2. The sort of deliberate foolishness that characterized the first Franciscans seems quite alien, today. Can you see any reasons why it might be beneficial to occasionally play the fool?
3. Do you know anyone, like Francis and Clare, who does not think much about the future? Is it possible to be a responsible citizen, parent, spouse, employee, without this sort of planning?

Chapter 7—Trying to Be Like Jesus

1. “Be imitators of Christ,” St. Paul said. Francis and Clare did that well. How important is it to literally imitate Christ, today? What would it look like?
2. What do you think of their objections to book study?
3. The following prayer of St. Clare illuminates the sort of determination and soulfulness that characterized her life. It is taken from the second letter that she wrote to Agnes of Prague.

Keep Doing What You Are Doing

What you are doing, may you keep on doing and do not stop.

But with swiftness, agility, and unswerving feet,

may you go forward with joy and security

knowing that you are on the path of wisdom and happiness.

Believe nothing, and agree with nothing

that will turn you away from this commitment.

Nothing should be allowed to prevent you

from offering yourself to the Most High in the perfection

to which the Spirit of God has called you. Amen.ⁱ

Chapter 8—Jugglers for God

1. Francis cut Clare's hair that first night. She was *tonsured*, which literally means sheared. In late antiquity, slaves were marked by the cutting of their hair, and so when the practice was adopted by clerical and monastic orders in about the third century, it was a way of identifying oneself completely with another. Circumcision functioned this way in the covenant with Israel, but then St. Paul told the Church in Rome to be more concerned with the circumcision of the heart and the spirit. Are physical signs still important for a disciple of Christ?
2. What do you think of the method used by Brother Bernard to recruit Franciscans in Bologna?

Chapter 9—Renewing the Bonds of Creation

1. Where do you primarily practice your faith—in the mind, through the body, in earthly ways, by spiritual means, or some mix of these?
2. How do today’s environmental concerns and issues relate back to what was started by Francis?

Chapter 10—Being Crucified with Christ

1. Do you believe that stigmatas really happen? Do you believe that God “touches” certain people in special ways? Why or why not?
2. If you have never read about Padre Pio, an Italian Franciscan of the last century, you may want to. He is the most famous stigmatist in recent years.
3. Identifying with Christ was of paramount important to Francis and Clare. What does it mean, today, to identify with him?

Chapter 11—*The Canticle of the Creatures*

1. Francis combined a penitent’s understanding that all created things will return to dust (Gen. 2:19) with a desire to live in ways that touched the earth deeply. Does this seem uncommon to you?

2. The *Canticle* is still sung today. Bill (Grayston) Ives (b. 1948), formerly a tenor with The King's Singers, composed an anthem with organ accompaniment for it in 1996, and it is often performed by choirs of all kinds. *The Canticle of Brother Sun* is published by Oxford University Press.
3. How does a good life make possible a good death? What is a good death?

Chapter 12—The Sepulcher of St. Francis

1. Despite being fifty years old, the best edition available of *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis* is translated by Raphael Brown (Image Books, 1958), and is still readily available. Tales 42-53 are entitled “Some Marvelous Stories of Certain Friars of the Province of the Marches,” and are an interesting source of additional information about the Spirituals.
2. You may want to go to the Internet and pull up one of the many websites that show color photographs of the interior of the Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi. The official site for the town is one such place: www.assisionline.com.
3. Nearly every spiritual movement has had a founder that inspired people, followed by an organizer who solidified control and authority. Can you think of others?

Chapter 13—Burning Books

1. The family tree of Franciscan reform movements is more detailed than we have already mentioned in this chapter. First, the Spirituals split from the Conventuals. Then, in the 1350s, the Observants split from the Conventuals. And in 1525, the Capuchins split from the Observants. Is reform always necessary, in order for a movement to remain focused on its mission and purpose?
2. In what ways can a Christian of any denomination keep reforming the faith without splitting into new groups?

Chapter 14—The Rise and Fall of the Spirituals

1. Read tale 38 from *The Little Flowers*, “How It Was Revealed to St. Francis that Brother Elias Was to Leave the Order.” This is an example of how differently the Spirituals interpreted the Franciscan tradition from the Conventuals.
2. When have you witnessed a loss of spiritual ideals—in your life? in the lives of others around you?

Chapter 15—After Clare’s Death

1. Have you ever had a relationship with someone of the other sex that was entirely filial and spiritual?

2. How do you think Francis and Clare might have related to each other differently had they been born in the 20th century, rather than when they were?

Chapter 16—Out of the Dark Ages

1. What's the purpose of studying the lives of Francis and Clare today?
2. What do you see as some of the “dark” ways that we live today?
3. Is Jesus' Sermon on the Mount too idealistic for our lives today? Are there parts of it that we couldn't actually keep?

ⁱ *The St. Clare Prayer Book: Listening for God's Leading*, by Jon M. Sweeney; Orleans, MA: Paraclete Press, 2007; XX.