

UNIT TWO, MODULE FOUR

HOW DO WE KNOW CLARE AND WHAT DOES SHE TELL US

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LESSON ONE: THE RULE OF ST CLARE 1 THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE RULE: FRANCIS TO BENEDICT

AIMS

To map the institutionalising of the charism of Clare as legislation for the Poor Sisters develops. In this lesson we will only go from 1212 to 1215.

‘At the end of her life, after calling together all her sisters, she entrusted the Privilege of Poverty to them. Her great desire was to have the Form of Life of the Order confirmed with a papal bull, to be able one day to place her lips upon the papal seal and then on the following day, to die. It occurred just as she desired. **CanProc 3.32**

Here is Sr Filippa, speaking on oath on 24 November 1235 at the canonisation process. This gives us the precise date when the *Forma Vitae* was approved. It also makes clear that this document was of paramount importance for Clare and her sisters. Remember that this same text had been approved by Rainaldo only the year before but she was still anxious to have it approved by the highest authority in the Church, a papal bull.

This passage gives rise to numerous questions, one of which is: If Clare’s *Forma vitae* was only approved two days before she died, what had been the rule of life of the sisters for the previous 40 years? This lesson will begin to answer that question. The answer lies in a long process of development which we could study as a legislative development, but which is much more fruitful to study as a developing understanding of a charism and the struggle to institutionalise that charism without losing anything essential. Out of this process, emerges Clare’s strength of character as well as her fidelity to her Gospel project.

1. 1212-1214 THE FORMA VIVENDI WHICH FRANCIS GAVE HER

There are a number of phrases or names which were used at that time to indicate what we would call a Rule, sometimes there are nuances between them, sometimes they are genuine alternatives. It is useful simply to be able to recognise them.

- *forma vivendi* - meaning a form, or pattern, of living, a phrase which Clare only used for Francis’ text
- *forma vitae* - a form of life, the term used by Rainaldo and Clare to mean what we tend to call her Rule, where she uses the phrase twice: Ch. 1,1 and Ch. 4,23,
 - *vitam et formam paupertatis* - the life and form of our poverty RegCl 4,5¹ TestCl 52
 - *forma paupertatis* - the form of our poverty RegCl 2,20.23; 9,1; 10,1; 12,3.
- *formula vitae* – the formula of life, a phrase used by Innocent IV
- Clare never uses the term *Regula*, Rule

Francis wrote Clare this *Forma vivendi*, pattern for living, somewhere before 1214, probably early in 1211 or 1212, when the whole enterprise was still in its springtime, filled with enthusiasm and a kind of heroism. Clare had joined the brothers after immense struggles from her family and background, but she also underwent some searching trials from Francis himself. Clare tells us:

¹ RegCl = the Form of Life, or Rule of Clare; TestCl = the Testament of Clare.

When the blessed Father saw that we had no fear of poverty, hard work, trial, shame or contempt of the world, but instead regarded these things as great delights, moved by compassion he wrote a form of life for us (RegCl 6.2)

Pietate motus moved with pity or compassion for us, he wrote a text which is not so much a Rule as an orientation - as far as we can tell from the fragment we have. This is that fragment:

Because, by divine inspiration, you have made yourselves daughters and servants of the Most High King, the heavenly Father, and have espoused yourselves to the Holy Spirit, choosing to live according to the perfection of the holy Gospel, I resolve and promise for myself and my brothers, always to have the same loving care and solicitude for you as I have for them. (RegCl 6. 3,4)

This fragment is probably the nucleus of the commitment Clare and Agnes made when they were 'received to obedience' by Francis. It is an inspirational text and would continue to inspire Clare for the rest of her life. For this reason alone it is significant. It is clearly not a Rule in the ordinary understanding of the word, so we can perhaps understand some of the pressure being brought on Clare. It is however, also possible that she found this text satisfactory, which may tell us something about her insights and attitudes. Nor must we forget that this is only a fragment. One of the mysteries is that so many precious texts written by Francis for Clare and her sisters have been lost.

To protect this *Forma vivendi*, and its important elements of i) poverty, ii) her link with the friars and (perhaps above all) iii) Francis' promise of special care and solicitude, Clare was even prepared to confront Gregory IX.

Once when the lord Pope Gregory forbade any brother to go to the monasteries of the Ladies without permission, the pious mother, sorrowing that her sisters would more rarely have the food of sacred teaching, sighed: Let him now take away from us all the brothers, since he has taken away those who provide us with food that is vital. At once she sent back to the minister all the brothers, not wanting to have questors who acquired corporal bread when they could not have questors for spiritual bread. When Pope Gregory heard this, he immediately mitigated that prohibition into the hands of the minister general. (LegCl 37)

We shall be returning to that important incident later, but for the moment let it stand simply as an indication of the value Clare placed on her link with the friars and as an indication of the pressure she was under to abandon what she had promised Francis. Gregory, as we have seen, was anxious that Clare should cut herself free from the friars and become the central figure of the groups of religious women which he himself was organising and which he would continue to care for even as pope.

There was another great woman, a contemporary of Clare, who was also joining in this struggle. This was Agnes of Prague, a princess of Bohemia. We shall return to Agnes in a later lesson. Agnes had heard of Clare's way of life and wanted to adopt it. She entered the struggle with great enthusiasm. Gregory and she had a constant correspondence during which Gregory asked her not to keep applying for the Privilege of Poverty and the *Forma Vivendi* which was, he said, simply food for babies while his own Constitutions were solid meat for grownups. His words were:

Beatus Franciscus, quibus tamquam modo genitis, non cibum solidum sed, qui videbat competere, potum lactis, formulam vitam tradidit.²

Blessed Francis, in the role of a parent, gave the Form of Life, not as solid food but, being such as he saw they could manage, milky food.

Clare certainly knew of this document because she hints at it in her second letter to

² *BF 1,243 Angelis gaudium*

Agnes, so it is all the more significant that she still inserts this *potum lactis*, this milky baby food, into her own *forma vitae*. Thanks to her tenacity, the Church finally recognised, through Innocent IV, that this was the authentic inspiration of her way of life, and still is. We see this from his words in the Prologue to Clare's form of life in the bull of confirmation (although this is jumping ahead of our story):

Thus we have before us your humble request that we confirm by our Apostolic authority the form of life that Blessed Francis gave you and which you have freely accepted. According to this you should live together in unity of mind and heart and in the profession of highest poverty. (Prologue to RegCl)

THE EVANGELICAL SPIRITUALITY OF THE GROUP AT SAN DAMIANO

Apart from the legislative aspect, the fragment we have does give us some idea of the profoundly evangelical spirituality of that little group at San Damiano. It shows us their inspiration and motivation. The consequences of Clare's stubborn fidelity to these are such central issues that the text is worth pausing on for a moment, taking the phrases one by one.

- *Because by divine inspiration* – Clare repeats several times her conviction that it is the divines inspiration that has called us, just as it was that same inspiration that called the brothers. (cf RegCl 2,1; 6,1; 2EpFid 51,55).
- *daughters and handmaids of the most high sovereign King, the heavenly Father* – note
 - the transcendent adjectives: high, sovereign, heavenly compared with the simplicity of the statement about the sisters: daughter, handmaid
 - parallelism: daughter – heavenly Father (at the extremes of the phrase); handmaid – most high, sovereign (at the centre of the phrase);
- *You have taken the Holy Spirit as your Spouse* –. the only time this appears in Clare's writings. For Francis this formula would also have evoked Clare's espousal to Christ because he saw no separation of the persons of the Trinity. Clare's espousal was Trinitarian, each Person leading us deeper into the other two.
- *choosing to live according to the perfection of the holy Gospel* – this is the element of choice, of commitment. Note that in the Middle Ages, the phrase 'perfection of the gospel' was commonly used by the various poverty movements to mean living like the first Christian community in the Acts of the Apostles. This is what is meant in the beginning of the Rules by: to observe the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and what is meant whenever the phrase: *the perfection of the Gospel* is used.
- The 2nd part of the text refers to Francis' commitment to the sisters. It becomes an element in her Rule because she saw this commitment as absolutely central and therefore as needing some sort of structure to sustain it. What that structure is will be spelt out in Chapter 12 of Clare's Rule under headings like the chaplain and the visitator and what the sisters look for from them both.

The **forma vivendi**, of Francis, then, is the source and inspiration of the whole venture at San Damiano. It sets the direction for the enterprise of living the Gospel. It mentions four main parts:

the loving call of God
the free response of the sister
the Trinitarian dimension of the life
Francis as the fount and inspiration

These four points were present in all Clare's decisions and actions until the end of her life in a way which makes it quite clear that whatever Rule she was living under, the inspiration for her life came from the **forma vivendi**. Fernando Uribe ofm suggests

that in all probability, the original intention, the original expectation of both Francis and Clare, was that this **forma vivendi** would follow much the same lines of development as the Proto-rule of Francis which he took to Innocent III in 1209/10. That is, it would gradually be enriched by experience until it finally became something like the first Rule of 1221, the *Regula non bullata*, or – even better – the *regula bollata*. But (in Uribe's words) this living growth into something more and more charismatic underwent many difficulties of an institutional and juridical nature.³

THE RULE OF ST BENEDICT

Originally the San Damiano community were under the bishop of Assisi, Guido and were more like what we would call today a diocesan congregation. That was fine while they remained within the diocese of Assisi. Problems began when they moved out of the diocese and we know that Sr Balvina went to take Clare's form of life to a community in Spello as early as 1214, and Clare's sister Agnes (not to be confused with Agnes of Prague) possibly went to Florence as early as 1219. When this movement into another diocese happened, their form of life needed a higher sanction than that of their own bishop. This situation was compounded after November 1215 by the 4th Lateran Council's decision to allow no more new rules. This meant that the Church was able to offer new groups a choice from one of four main rules written by:

Pachomius
Basil
Benedict
Augustine

Francis' rule had been approved in 1209/10 but only orally, not in writing. Clare was forced to make a choice here: either she must remain within the diocese of Assisi, even though her sisters were being asked for from other places, or she must accept one of these rules and find some means of establishing a legislation which would allow her to live the inspiration to which she was called.

Although the timing is not clear, the fact remains that Clare accepted the Rule of St Benedict. Not only that, but she did so without compromise and it is interesting to see its influence on her own later text. Benedict's influence was largely organisational and in three main areas: the tasks of the abbess, the use of things in the community and how to cope with the disobedient. For anything was to do with the evangelical inspiration of her life, Clare referred exclusively to the teaching of Francis and later to the Rules of 1221/3, and particularly when anything touched on her life in poverty.

READING

4:1 Extract from Fernando Uribe's article on the Rule of St Benedict on the Rule of Clare.⁴

³ Prof. Fernando Uribe ofm: *L'Iter Storico della Regola di S Chiara: una prova di fedeltà al Vangelo*; in *Dialoghi con Chiara d'Assisi* ed Luigi Giacometti, Edizioni Porziuncola 1995

⁴ *L'iter storico della Regola di S. Chiara: una prova di fedeltà al Vangelo*, publ. in *Dialoghi con Chiara d'Assisi* ed L Giacometti, Edizioni Porziuncola 1995

How do we know Clare and what does she tell us

LESSON TWO: THE RULE OF ST CLARE 2 THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE RULE: FRANCIS TO INNOCENT IV

AIMS

To complete our study of the development of Clare's Rule and the various legislative changes she had to negotiate in order to express her vision in a way the institution of the Church could adopt.

Between 1215 and 1219 three events took place. These are sometimes confused and presented as one,

1. **1215 - Francis appoints Clare as 'guardian' at San Damiano.**

We read about this in Sr Pacifica's evidence:

This witness also said three years after Saint Clare had been in the Order, at the prayers and insistence of Saint Francis, who almost forced her, she accepted the direction and government of the sisters. **(CanProc 1,6)**

At this time, guardians were being appointed in the friaries for the first time, because the number of brothers had become so great that Francis could no longer exercise that role for them. It seems likely that Francis appointed Clare as 'guardian' of San Damiano in much the same way. The Legend tells us that:

Three years after her conversion, declining the name and office of Abbess, she wished in her humility to be placed under others rather than above them and among the servants of Christ to serve more willingly than to be served. Compelled by blessed Francis, however, she accepted the government of the ladies ... **(LegCl 12)**

These two texts make a clear distinction between 'the direction and government of the sisters' and 'the office of Abbess' which she declined.

2. **1215/6** – after Lateran IV, and because of the expansion of the Order, **Clare accepts the Rule of St Benedict**. If the 1216 Privilege of Poverty is genuine, then it could have formed part of Clare's attempt to conform to the Council's wishes while not compromising herself or the evangelical project of San Damiano in the matter of poverty. She accepted Benedict's Rule while finding her inspiration and spiritual nourishment in the *Forma Vivendi* of Francis.

3. **1218** Hugolino (later Gregory IX) is sent into Tuscany to organise the religious women and *at some point*, **Clare accepts Hugolino's Constitutions**. At what point? We do not know but possibly between the death of Francis in 1226 and his canonisation in 1228 when Gregory came to see her at San Damiano and they had a famous confrontation:

Pope Gregory of happy memory, a man very worthy of the papal throne as he was venerable in his deeds, loved this holy woman intensely with a fatherly affection. When he was attempting to persuade her that because of the events of the times and the dangers of the world, she should consent to have some possessions, which he himself willingly offered, she resisted with a very strong spirit and would in no way acquiesce. To this the Pope replied: If you fear for your vow, We absolve you from it. 'Holy Father' she said 'I will never in any way wish to be absolved from the following of Christ.' (LegCl 14)

The result of this visit and this confrontation was that Gregory renewed for Clare the Privilege of Poverty in almost the same words as the text of Innocent III and later extended the Privilege to any community who applied for it. In return Clare seems to have accepted Gregory's Constitutions in much the same way as she had previously accepted the Rule of St Benedict, knowing that poverty, her main concern, was safeguarded by the Privilege.

Agnes of Prague Sometime after this, Gregory wrote to Agnes of Prague, saying that Clare and her community had accepted his Constitutions, why could not Agnes? He does not seem to have realised that the two women may have been in contact, as a result of which Agnes also tries to make the same arrangement, namely, to accept the Constitutions in return of the Privilege of Poverty.

THE PRIVILEGE OF POVERTY

Privilege here is Clare's word in her Testament (42) where she uses it in the plural, a fact which is taken to indicate the two versions of the Privilege. The Legend says:

She asked the Privilege of Poverty of Innocent III of happy memory, desiring that her Order be known by the title of poverty. This magnificent man, congratulating such great fervour in the virgin, spoke of the uniqueness of her proposal, since such a privilege had never been made by the Apostolic See, The Pope himself with great joy, wrote with his own hand the first draft of the privilege sought after, so that an unusual favour might smile upon an unusual request. (LegCl 14)

So Innocent conceded to the monastery of San Damiano this privilege of poverty which guaranteed that no-one would be able to force her to accept property or 'anything that might reasonably be called property'.

READING

4:2 The Privilege of Poverty *See readings 3:9*

Points to notice:

1. **The language**, which is very much the language used by Clare herself in her letters; note words like *ancilla*, handmaid; *altissimae paupertatis*, most high poverty; Jesus made for us the Way, the inspiration of the Song of Songs in the understanding of Christ in her personal life – all these have strong echoes in the 4th letter to Agnes of Prague.
2. **This affinity** of language has led some scholars to ask seriously whether the text was written for Innocent III by Clare herself, at least in its first draft. Somebody had to write it, how sensible to ask the woman who was requesting this original and unusual permission, that of not being forced to have anything.
3. **The privilege of poverty** as it appears in the Rule: the requirement that the postulant sell her goods and give them to the poor as a condition for following Christ (cf RegCl 2.7); the validity of the privilege for the sisters then as well as for those to come (RegCl 6.6); her explicit determination to have no possessions (RegCl 6.12); The prohibition and sanctions against any interference in this matter reflect those in the Last Will of Francis and in one of Clare's own letters.
4. Without doubt, what this document represented was the sensitive heart of Francis' **Forma Vivendi**. No wonder that she cherished the document, as Sr Filippa tells us:

At the end of her life, after calling together all her sisters, she entrusted the Privilege of Poverty to them. (ProcCan 3.32)

From this point on, Clare and her sisters observed the Rule of Benedict in all except what mattered to them, namely poverty.

THE CONSTITUTIONS OF HUGOLINO

By following the story through to 1228, we have jumped ahead a little and must now return to the time between 1216 and 1219. Clare's way of life was spreading in two ways:

1. by foundations from San Damiano
2. by existing communities requesting her Form of Life.

So by 1214 Clare was already running into juridical difficulties.

In 1218, Hugolino was authorised by Honorius III (27 August 1218 *Litterae tuae*) to accept groups of women under one organisational umbrella. To do this, he drew up some norms which we now know as the Constitutions of Hugolino. These were not a Rule but a number of norms and prescriptions and ascetic principles for these monasteries or religious groups of women, whom he called:

pauperes moniales reclusae, a catch-all phrase meaning devout women who were not religious in the strict canonical sense. In addition, he based these Constitutions on the Rule of St Benedict. This was the Rule the early sisters professed (though not Clare or Agnes for they never made another profession than that into the hands of Francis). Jesús Sanz Montes says⁵

We must distinguish between belonging to the monastic institution and belonging to the Benedictine Order. The San Damiano community and those communities connected with it belonged to the monastic institution while they professed the Rule of St Benedict along with other inspirational documents.

This is an important distinction.

1228 Celano says that the sisters at San Damiano lived by the

glorious institution they had received from the Lord Pope Gregory, at that time Bishop of Ostia. (1 Cel 20)

It seems that there was a long transition period, starting before Gregory became Pope in 1227, perhaps even earlier, after the death of Francis in 1226, and not ending until Gregory's famous conversation with Clare in 1228. At that meeting, he had clearly hoped that his extra authority as Pope would enable him to win his point.

Hugolino's Constitutions were an exercise in *contemptus mundi*, in despising the world. They fall into three parts:

1. Introduction - Basically the papal bull of Honorius III authorising him to do this work.
2. Main text which deals with
 - a. the demands made on those professing this life
 - b. divine office
 - c. silence
 - d. fasting
 - e. care of the sick
 - f. clothes and bedding
 - g. entry into the enclosure
 - h. the chaplain

⁵ *Clara de Asis, Herencia y tarea*, Madrid 1993, pp 268

- i. visitor
 - j. doorkeepers
3. Conclusion – an exhortation to observe this faithfully

There are four main points to note here:

1. the absence of any spiritual or inspirational basis
2. the absence of any instructions on e.g. government, elections, the role of the abbess etc
3. the heavy bias towards the ascetical and penitential, there is not much on prayer and nothing on the sacraments.
4. the community is only mentioned in connection with the sick. Poverty is not mentioned at all.

However (to use a word beloved by Clare) there can be no doubt but that Clare, having accepted these texts, lived them conscientiously and allowed them to influence her, at least to some extent. We can conclude this because the Constitutions of Hugolino are an influence on San Damiano, though sometimes only a negative influence. Yet they figure in Clare's own Rule when she came to write it. Even if she only accepted these constitutions as late as 1228, she would still have lived by them for nearly 20 years by 1247 when Innocent IV changed them. Elements which remain in Clare's own Rule of 1253:

- not accepting candidates who were too old or infirm: Hug. 7 – Clare 2.5
- rules on fasting: Hug 7 – Clare 3,8-10
- the Abbess is to submit to ordinary arrangements in the parlour and elsewhere: Hug 6 – Clare 5.9-13; 12.11
- Arrangements about the grille and parlour: Hug 11 – Clare 5.9-13; 12.11
- Care of the sick: Hug 8 – Clare 8.12; 17-18
- Qualities needed to be portress, details about keys etc: Hug 13 – Clare 11.1-3, 5-6, 10-11
- the bishop coming into the enclosure: Hug 10 – Clare 11.7-9
- Visitor: Hug 12 – Clare 12.2-3

Analysing these items, we see that they are largely ascetic and organisational and to a large extent reflected the law of the period.

1226 THE LAST WILL 'ULTIMA VOLUNTAS' OF FRANCIS

According to the *Compilatio of Assisi* (formerly known as the *Anonymus of Perugia*), in the week before Francis' death, Clare became gravely ill and thought she would die before he did. She wanted to see him again, but they were both so ill it was impossible, so Francis composed a letter to her. The *Compilation of Assisi* (written about 1246) says:

Francis pondered that what she desired, that is to see him, was impossible at that time since both of them were gravely ill, he wrote his blessing in a letter to comfort her and he also absolved her of all failing, if she had any, in obeying his commands and wishes and those of the Son of God. Moreover, that she might put aside all grief and be consoled in the Lord, he told the brother whom she had sent to him – yet the Spirit of God not himself spoke through him – 'Go and take this letter to Lady Clare and tell her to put aside all sorrow and sadness because she cannot see me at this moment. But let her know that before she dies both she and her sisters will see me and have the greatest consolation from me.

The words we now know as Francis' Last Will are, however, different and come to us from Clare's Rule where she placed them in a central position, in chapter six, which is

the heart of her text.

I, brother Francis, the little one, wish to follow the life and poverty of our most high Lord Jesus Christ and of his most holy mother, and to persevere in this until the end; and I ask and counsel you, my ladies, to live always in this most holy life and in poverty. This became the inspirational heart for Clare and for that reason alone is worth considering a little further.

1. **I wish to follow the life and poverty of the Most High Lord and his most holy mother:** this was the theological insight which gave meaning to the lives of Francis and Clare. The question for them was how to follow the poverty of Christ, their 'most high Lord' and that of his 'most holy mother'.
2. **persevere** – to see this through to the end was Francis' great prayer and his wish for the Poor Ladies too, that they be faithful unto the end.
3. **I beg you, my ladies** – an exhortation, an encouragement and a plea that Clare, at least, be faithful whatever decisions were being made by others or whatever pressure is brought to bear on her. Remember what was happening among the brothers by this time, the dissatisfaction about the Rule of 1221 and the clerical-lay debate was already on the horizon. So Francis leaves with Clare, as his last will and testament, to be faithful to the life and poverty of Christ.
4. **Do not fall away in any respect from this no matter who advises you** – advice which Clare followed even when her advisor was Pope Gregory IX, and advice which she passed on to Agnes of Prague in the same situation (cf 2Ag 14,17) Because this is the inspirational heart of her life, Clare then passes it on to those who will come after her by writing it into her Rule. The words which follow in Chapter 6 of the Rule are significant:

As I, together with my sisters, have ever been solicitous to safeguard the holy poverty⁵ we have promised the Lord God and blessed Francis, so too the Abbesses who shall succeed me in office and all the sisters are bound to observe it inviolably to the end: that is, by not having or receiving ownership either of themselves or through an intermediary, or even anything that might reasonably be called property except as much land as necessity requires for the integrity and proper seclusion of the monastery. (RegCl 6.10-14)

THE RULE OF INNOCENT IV 1247

The earliest manuscript of Hugolino's Constitutions is dated 1219. From then on, throughout his pontificate, this text went through a number of changes. We do not know if it was much changed, but it seems unlikely that it lasted for so long with no modifications in the light of experience. We do know, however, that it was revised and altered by Innocent IV in 1247, partly in reply to the request of Agnes of Prague (and others) to remove any mention of the Rule of St Benedict from the profession formula.

9 August 1247 Innocent IV approves a new form of life for: **universis abbatissis et monialibus inclusis Ordinis Sancti Damiani**. (For all the abbesses and nuns of the Order of St Damian).⁶

This was a real attempt to clear up the difficulties and to remove anything objected to. So the Rule of St Benedict is taken out and the Rule of St Francis inserted instead. Basically this is Hugolino's text with modifications and adaptations and makes three important concessions:

1. The Rule of Francis, 1223, is the basis
2. Francis is mentioned in the profession formula

⁶ BullFran I, 394-399

3. the sisters are committed to the care of the Minister General and the Provincial, to be under their 'obedience, government and rule'.

The twelve chapters are headed in this way:

1. Entrance and religious profession
2. The divine office
3. Silence and recollection
4. Fasting and the care of the sick
5. Clothes, the dormitory and beds
6. Entrance into the enclosure
7. The chaplain, the confessor and the enclosure of the church
8. The canonical visitation
9. Doors and parlours
10. Extern sisters
11. The goods of the monastery
12. The authority of the monastery and the monastic family

Again, nothing is said about government, elections and many similar items which it is important to have settled if the house is to run smoothly. Again, too, we find that certain elements remain in the Rule of Clare, and many of these are the legislation required at the time or else practical matters which she had found worked satisfactorily. These are:

- k. Novice mistress: Inn 1 – Clare 2, 19-20
- l. The Divine Office in the form which the friars use: Inn 2 – Clare 3,.1
- m. Black curtain at the grille: Inn 9 – Clare 5.15
- n. The sisters who go out are to be edifying! Inn 1 - Clare 9.12
- o. the visitor is always to be a friar: Inn 8 – Clare 12.1

As before, these are mainly organisational details.

However, there is still no provision for poverty as Clare understands it and as she and Francis committed themselves to live it, rather the contrary:

As far as this is concerned, you may be permitted to receive, to have in common and to freely retain produce and possessions. A procurator, one who is prudent as well as loyal may be had in every monastery of the Order to deal with these possessions in a becoming way. (RegInn 11)

This generates another storm of protest, because by now the sisters have learnt how to proceed in these matters. Finally in 1250, three years after promulgating his Rule, Innocent rescinds this Form of Life of Hugolino in a letter dated 6 June 1250,⁷ and says that the sisters are only obliged to keep the three vows!

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BullFran I,476-483

LESSON THREE: THE RULE OF ST CLARE 3

AIMS

To study the actual text of Clare's Rule and to grasp a little of its originality.

THE LAST LAP OF DEVELOPMENT

The obviously unsatisfactory character of Innocent's Rule was one factor which brought Clare to write her own Rule, and she could not accept the following elements of it:

- the abolition of poverty in common
- that the Rule of St Francis was given to all the nuns of the Order of Saint Damian – Hugolino's foundation, and they were really nothing to do with Francis at all.

Never before in history had a woman written a Rule for a community. Clare was the first to have the originality, the vision and courage to do this. The Rule represents the end of a steep and long learning curve for her. We do not know when it was begun but it was finished by early 1252 when Cardinal Rainaldo, the Protector of the Order, came to visit her, probably in the spring.

The Lord of Ostia [...] had become a father to her by his office, a provider by his care, always a dedicated friend by his very pure affection. He nourished the sick woman with the Body of the Lord and fed those remaining with the encouragement of his salutary word. Then she begged so great a father with her tears to take care of her soul and those of the other Ladies for the name of Christ. But above all, she asked him to petition to have the Privilege of Poverty confirmed by the Lord Pope and the cardinals. Because he was a faithful helper of the Order, just as he promised by his deed, so he fulfilled by his word. (LegCl 40)

Many commentators are of the opinion that the Privilege of Poverty mentioned here is in fact Clare's Rule, mainly because we have no record of another Privilege of Poverty of 1252/3 and because Rainaldo does give his episcopal approval to Clare's Rule on 16 September 1252, sent from Perugia with the approval of Innocent IV. This is clear from the Prologue to the Bull of approval, *Solet annuere*. However, at this point you may like to **reread the supplementary reading for Module Three, Lesson Six**, from Marco Bartoli: *Clare: beyond the Legend*, and see what you think yourself. Do we see any sign of Clare speaking of both Form of Life and Privilege of Poverty as being one and the same, or do you get the impression that there were two things and she was quite clear about the difference?

READING

4:3 as 3:12

Early in 1253 Clare's health deteriorated seriously.

After a year had passed, the Lord Pope moved with his cardinals from Perugia. Lord Innocent IV of happy memory together with the cardinals hurried to visit the servant of Christ. Since he considered her life to be beyond that of women of our time, he did not hesitate to honour her death with the papal presence. (LegCl 41)

Innocent by-passed the usual canonical procedures and on 9 August 1253, Clare received a papal bull confirming the approval of her Rule: she learned a brother had come with letters bearing the papal bull, says Filippa in her evidence.

THE FORM OF LIFE OF CLARE

Let us now look at the *Forma Vitae*, **the Form of Life of Clare**.

READING

4:4 *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, ed. & tr. Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap (Franciscan Institute Publications, New York, 1993)

Take time at this point to read the text of Clare's Form of Life. Use the following notes like a map.

This text can be summarised in several ways:

1. It is a document of fidelity to the Gospel
2. It is a prolonged study in *sine proprio*
3. It is an application of Francis' Rule of 1223 for women in a cloistered situation

Note that she never uses the word Rule, but only Form of Life, and in fact uses that phrase in several different ways: the form of our life, the form of our poverty, the form of speaking in the parlour. This may have been out of respect for the decrees of Lateran IV forbidding any new rules, or a deliberate desire to follow Francis in offering a Form of Life rather than something prescriptive. There is also an influence of, or at least an echo of, the Rule for Hermits. Some think that the latter was based on what Francis saw happening at San Damiano, others think that Clare in San Damiano applied what Francis had advised in the Rule for Hermits. Much hangs on the final conclusion of scholars about the date of the Rule for Hermits.

Bear in mind that the division into chapters came along later so is not significant, only convenient. It is possible to say that the whole of Clare's Form of Life is contained in the first chapter; all the rest is commentary and application. Nevertheless, there are moments of great wisdom and insight in the text. Here is a brief summary which in no way replaces reading the actual text for yourself. The summary, though, may give a bit of structure to your own reading.

One: *The Form of Life of the Poor Sisters which blessed Francis instituted:* this roots her text in Francis. Then she looks at: Clare and the Gospel; Clare and Francis; Clare and the Church; Clare and the Order; Clare and the future.

Two: *On those who want to accept this life and how they are to be received.* She also gives advice about community meetings (weekly) and guidelines for formation.

Three: *The Divine Office, Fasting, Confession and Communion:* the official prayer of the community and the sacraments

Four: *Elections, the Abbess and her council, Chapter and other officials:* these are the structures of government. What is unusual in Clare is that the instrument of government is the abbess and her community, not the abbess and her council.

Five: *Silence, the parlour and the grate:* detailed arrangements to enable the contemplative life to flourish. Some of this would have been the canon law of the time.

Six: *On having no possessions:* this is the heart of the Rule and is composed of two texts from Francis and some autobiographical reflections of Clare's own. It is

true to say that 6-10 are the core of Clare's Rule, a sustained reflection on *sine proprio* applied in all sorts of different areas

- Seven:** The manner of work: *sine proprio and the need for work*, work considered as a grace. Much of this is an adaptation of Francis' words on work, especially Ch 7 of the Regula non Bollata of 1221.
- Eight:** That the sisters appropriate nothing to themselves: *sine proprio and material want*. It also considers the pastoral role of the abbess.
- Nine:** *sine proprio when things go wrong and when away from home*. Penance for wrongdoers, a required part of monastic legislation at the time; some good advice for everyone else. Then she speaks about the sisters who serve outside the monastery:
- Ten:** Admonition and correction: *sine proprio in the area of our own will*, again the pastoral role of the abbess, again much of it taken from Francis.
- Eleven:** The enclosure: *sine proprio in the area of independence*, who can come in (a surprising number of people) when and why.
- Twelve:** The visitator, the chaplain and the cardinal protector; these are the spiritual helpers of the community.

The genius of Clare lay in the way she took Francis Rule of 1223, written for a roving group of men, and adapted it for a group of women living a relatively stable life, without losing anything essential and without any infidelity. At the same time she was well able to disagree with Francis, over money for instance which he would not allow the friars to touch. Clare says that if a sisters is given any money to buy something then if she need it, she may buy it. If she does not need it, then she shall give the money to one who does. So Clare never takes away personal responsibility from her community, but consistently treats them as mature adults living a freely chosen life of commitment.

Clare's Form of Life is in no way simply an adaptation of Hugolino's Rule.⁸ To understand the Rule of Clare we need to have an intuitive sense of her vocation, her spiritual journey and how she responded to her call from God. Having responded, she followed that call in the way Francis had shown her. We must not forget that in the beginning, she knew she had a special call from God and could not find the way to follow it. Francis showed her that way and she discovered that the Way was Christ who is also Truth and Life. So her Form of Life is not just a document written in ink, but it is written in her life's experience and sometimes in her heart's blood.

Most truly, it has been said that it is:

a testimony or an act of faithful homage on Clare's part, to God who called her, and to Francis through whom she was called, and to the Church which accompanied and purified her, to her sisters with whom she journeyed. All these fidelities are present in that final moment when Clare sits down to embark on her final adventure: writing 'her' Rule.⁹

READING

- 4:5 Carney M., O.S.F., *The First Franciscan Woman: Clare of Assisi & Her Form of Life*, (Franciscan Press, 1993), (Approaches to Analysis of the Rule) pp 88-97

⁸ Incomprehensibly, this was the opinion of Sr Chiara Augusta Lainati osc in *La Regola Francescana* p. 240

⁹ J. Sanz Montes, *Clara de Asis*, p.274

LESSON FOUR: AGNES OF PRAGUE AND MEDIEVAL LETTERS



AIMS

This lesson introduces Agnes of Prague who became a close friend and supporter of Clare and to whom Clare wrote the four letters which have come down to us. We will look at Agnes' story, look briefly at the history of Clare's letters to her, and at the medieval art of letter writing itself.

PART I: AGNES OF PRAGUE'S STORY

1211 (or thereabouts) Agnes was born, the last of 13 children, to Ottokar I of Bohemia and Constance, aunt of Elizabeth of Hungary – who was to have a great influence on Agnes. When Agnes was 3, she was betrothed, in the manner of the time, to the Duke of Silesia who was also a child, and she was sent to Silesia to be educated with her future husband. He died in 1217 and Agnes went to the Premonstratensian convent of Dozenji for education.

In 1220 she was again betrothed by her father to Henry VII, son of Frederick II, but Leopold of Austria secretly marries his own daughter to Henry VII. Agnes' father recalls her in fury and declares war on Austria. So already we see how Agnes' fortunes are bound up with European politics. It has been said that Agnes' entry into religious life altered the political map of Europe and there is some truth in this.

1230 her father Ottokar I dies and is succeeded by her much-loved brother Wenceslas (not the one in the carol!). The next year Elizabeth of Hungary dies aged 24 and is canonised in 1232. Inspired by her example, Agnes builds a large hospital in Prague (which is still there) and founds an Order to care for it, The Order of the Cross and the Red Star, or Croziers of the Red Star. This Order still exists, though their numbers dropped to 8 members under Communism. They look to Agnes as their foundress. Around this same time, 1233, Frederick II's wife dies and he asks for Agnes as his own bride. Agnes, who by this time had been suggested as bride for at least two others, including the King of England, refuses Frederick and declares her intention to enter religious life in the convent she has already begun to build.

AGNES CONTACTS CLARE

Agnes had heard about Clare from the friars who had now reached as far north as Prague, and she asks for some sisters to teach her and her 11 noblewomen companions, about Clare's Form of Life. Five German sisters were sent to Prague from the monastery in Trento and in 1234 Agnes and her eleven companions enter the monastery in a major ceremony attended by the King and Queens and numerous bishops and abbots. Gregory IX writes appointing Agnes abbess of this monastery.

1234 is a probable date of the first letter from Clare to Agnes, though it seems that another letter was also written because Gregory IX tells Blanche of Castille that Clare wrote to Agnes sending her four gifts:

1. a veil to symbolise her commitment to God,
2. a small wooden bowl to symbolise that she was choosing poverty, becoming a mendicant
3. a crucifix to indicate her commitment
4. a set of prayer beads to indicate her way of life.

The letter we know as 1 Agnes makes no mention of these gifts which suggests that there was a previous (now lost) letter. It also seems that Agnes only gradually realised the implications of the situation she was now in, and the nuances between the Forma Vivendi which Francis had given to Clare, and the Constitutions of Hugolino which she seems to have adopted in the beginning. By 1234, however, she is refusing to accept the revenues from the hospital (as Gregory wanted) and begins to come in conflict with him on the issue of poverty.

THE PRIVILEGE OF POVERTY

1237 Agnes writes to Gregory asking for the privilege of Poverty which he had (reluctantly) given Clare in 1228 and to several other monasteries who had individually applied since. The situation with Agnes is still becoming clear as more research goes on, and there is a document in Prague which hints that she professed 'the unapproved version of the Rule'. It is not clear what this means, but it might mean the Forma Vivendi of Francis. Gregory's own Constitutions are not likely to be called 'unapproved'!

1238 Agnes again asks for the Privilege of Poverty and is refused. On 11 May Gregory imposes his own Constitutions on Agnes and expresses disapproval of Francis' Forma Vivendi, calling it *potum lactis*, milky food for babies, and telling her she now needs the more meaty stuff of his own Constitutions! This conflict continued until, three years later Gregory dies and in 1243 Agnes applies to Innocent IV but is again refused and told not to ask again. In 1247, Innocent imposes his own revision of the Constitutions of Gregory (Hugolino) and sends a copy to Agnes as well. This struggle will reappear as we consider each letter from Clare.

THE LAST YEARS

Not much is known about the next 15 years except that Wenceslas, her brother, had given Agnes an area of land in Prague near the river Moldau and also extensive rights, for instance that the land was a place of sanctuary. This meant that large numbers of poor and dispossessed came to the monastery for food and help. There is still a huge bread oven in the monastery grounds which dates back to Agnes' time.

All through these years the conflict continues, the papacy keeps trying to persuade Agnes (and others) to accept property and she both refuses and becomes much clearer about what was at stake. Her friendship with Clare deepens. As far as we know, they never met face to face. 1253 was a hard year for Agnes. Clare dies, Elias, the previous Minister General who had greatly helped her, dies, and Wenceslas her much-loved brother also dies –three key advisors in one year.

The *Legend of Agnes* tells us that as soon as the Rule was approved, Clare sent Agnes a copy. This must have meant some forethought and quick action because Innocent IV only approved Clare's Rule on 9 August and she died on 11 August. She must have had copies made and ready and sent them off the minute the approval came through. Innocent dies in 1254 and Agnes asks Alexander IV (formerly Cardinal Rainaldo, protector of the Order) to be allowed this Rule and is granted it.

Wenceslas had been succeeded by his eldest son Ottokar II, who seems to have been a war-like and unwise man who quickly lost the support of his nobility and people. He failed to listen to the good advice of his aunt too. As a result, he falls foul of Austria, and in 1273 Austria claims Bohemia as a fief. Instead of negotiating with a powerful neighbour, Ottokar attacks, but his nobility desert him. In a battle in 1278 he is slain and Bohemia becomes an invaded and subject nation. Bohemian nationalism is powerful.

1281/2 Agnes dies on 2nd March. The bishop of Prague has thrown in his lot with the Austrian invader, and we find that he refuses to bury Agnes. Is this because her convent had become a centre of Bohemian nationalism and resistance? We do not know his reasons. It is possible that anywhere which was a place of sanctuary, had a powerful leader (Agnes), was known as a source of help as well as food, and which was safe from the Secret Police of the time, could well become a centre of national resistance. It is difficult to know how else to interpret the bishop's refusal. In the event Agnes lay unburied for two weeks until Bonagrazia, the friars' Provincial, could come up from Germany to conduct the funeral.

PART II: CLARE'S LETTER TO AGNES

THE MANUSCRIPT TRADITION

In 1668, the Bollandists had produced and published a Latin text in 1668, almost certainly translated by them from the German version. The first Letter had also been printed in Nicholas Glassberger's *Chronicles of the Twenty-Four Generals* in 1491.

In 1915, Walter Seton published an edition based largely on his work with the German text, of which there is a manuscript in the Royal Library of Bamberg as four or five other manuscripts preserved in various German libraries.¹⁰

The Latin manuscript of Clare's letters to Agnes which we use today was discovered in 1896 by Dr Achille Ratti, then archivist at the Ambrosian Library, Milan. In the archives of the Basilica of Sant'Ambrogio in Milan, he found a manuscript (Codex M-10) of the four letters of Clare to Agnes, written in Latin, and a Latin version of the *Legend of Saint Agnes of Prague*. He was satisfied that it was written before the beginning of the 14th century, and J. K. Vyskočil later established that they had been copied between 18 January 1283 and 8 November 1322 and possibly in Prague itself. The Milan text was first published by Walter Seton in 1924 and later formed the basis for Giovanni Boccali's critical edition in 1982 and thence for the text of Ignacio Omaechevarria's *Escritos de Santa Clara y Documentos Complementarios* (Madrid 1982)

We also know, of course, that the Prague monastery had a flourishing scriptorium so it is not impossible that the copy was actually made there, where it had first been sent. It seems probable that the copy was made in order to be attached to the Life of Agnes being sent to Rome in the hope of promoting her canonisation. The earlier in time that a copy can be dated, then the more likelihood there is of it being authentic, so these very early dates give us every reason to believe that the four letters attributed to Clare of Assisi are, in fact, by her.

MEDIEVAL LETTERS IN GENERAL

In the Middle Ages, letter writing was a highly developed art for the educated classes, called the *Ars Dictandi*, the art of dictating, since a secretary would have been normal. We do not know if Clare had secretary or not, some think Brother Leo performed this service for her as he had for Francis, while others think that the letters emerged out of a group gathered around Clare and the spirituality they shared and encouraged in each other. Her letters show all the signs of education and culture, are well constructed and in beautiful Latin. They follow the basic pattern laid down for such literary forms which would be:

1. An Opening Address

¹⁰ For the adventurous, these are i) a second m/s in Bamberg; ii) 15th C Wolfenbütel m/s; iii) 15th C Dresden m/s; iv) 15th C Berlin m/s.

2. The body of the text
3. The Ending.

Each section could have further subdivisions and had to follow certain rules.

1. The Opening Address: this would mention by name

- (a) the sender
- (b) the recipient
- (c) the theme

The order of a) and b) would be reversed if the recipient were of a higher social standing than the sender, and this we find Clare correctly does.

2. The Body of the Text – we shall note certain recurring themes in Clare’s texts:

- 1) references to Agnes the Roman martyr
- 2) the choice of and commitment to poverty
- 3) encouragement to stand fast against opposition

3. Endings which gather up the theme of the letters and brings them to a close, again in a formalised way.

HOW TO READ A LETTER

We should always bear in mind that simply because letters are so familiar to us, they are also full of hazards because it is very easy for us to make assumptions which are only based on our own experience, not that of the two people concerned – in this case, Clare and Agnes.

Before beginning to read the letters, it is helpful to nail down some facts by answering the following questions as best you can:

1. Who wrote this letter and to whom?
4. Was any other audience envisaged?
5. How was the letter preserved?
6. Do we know why it was written?
7. Do we know the date?
8. How does this date relate to key events in the writer's life?
9. How does this date relate to key events in the recipient's life?
10. What was the situation behind this letter?
11. What do those events suggest about why the letter was written at all?
12. What are its main themes?
13. What do we know about the actual parchment, where has it been all these years, where is it now?
14. If there is no parchment, what copies do we have and what date are they?
15. What is the history of its discovery? If you do not know, where will you go to find out.
16. What uses can the letter serve today? In social history, political history, biography, literary history, cultural studies etc or in personal spiritual growth, in prayer, in Franciscan studies?
17. What is the letter about (in your own words)

Have you read the footnotes?!

READING

- 4:6 *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, ed. & tr. Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap
(Franciscan Institute Publications, New York, 1993)
The 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th letters to Agnes of Prague

As a preliminary exercise, using the text in the Writings of Francis and Clare or in *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents* (and if you have the third edition, this is the latest and most correct) spend some time reading the four letters. But before we can read them for nourishment, we will be taking them to bits, sorting out themes and picking up on some key points. See *“How to Read a Letter”* above

How do we know Clare and what does she tell us

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LESSON FIVE: LETTERS ONE, TWO AND THREE

AIMS

To study Clare's first three letters to Agnes of Prague.

READING

4:7 *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, ed. & tr. Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap (Franciscan Institute Publications, New York, 1993)

Re-read the 1st, 2nd and 3rd letters of Clare to Agnes. See Reading 4:6

NOTE:

the formality, the (to our way of thinking) stylised manner. Remember that Clare was 'only' a member of the minor Italian aristocracy and now Abbess of a small monastery (though well-known and not without influence, but not worldly influence). Agnes was daughter of the King of Bohemia, her country was at the height of its Golden Age and its favour was sought by many European powers. So Clare was writing to a princess of a powerful house in an age where courtesies were extremely important and significant. If Clare wanted to be heard by Agnes, she had to speak to her in the language Agnes knew. For us, the formality can be a barrier, but work to enter into the mindset of these two women and the power of their correspondence will begin to reveal itself to you.

With the 1st letter, remember that, as far as we know, this was the introductory letter from Clare to Agnes, so necessarily more formal, and also remember that they had not met. At this moment, Clare knew very little about the woman she was writing to except that she was one of considerable strength of character who had been fired by Clare's example and all she had learned from the friars minor.

A note on authorship: until recently the authenticity of these letters was not questioned. Recently the suggestion has been made that they were not written by Clare alone but arose out of the shared reflection and theology of the group around her at San Damiano.

- 4) One reason for this is the difference in style between the letters and the Rule and Blessing and (possibly) the Testament. Has there been an editor? Who? Why? When? All unanswerable questions at the moment.
- 5) Another reason is the high literary standard of the letters. Would Clare's 'provincial aristocracy' have been able to offer such a high literary level? The letters all follow the strict rules of the *Ars dictandi*, the art of dictating letters (ie writing letters)
- 6) they reveal great confidence in the skills of rhetoric and syntax, a wide knowledge of Scripture and the liturgy, all of which presuppose a high cultural level which would not be impossible but which is surprising.
- 7) However the consensus at present seems to be that Clare was a remarkable woman, capable of such literary skills and that we can read them as authentic, while still bearing in mind the communal nature of life at San Damiano, Clare's close connection with friars like Leo, Rufino, Angelo etc, and the extent to which they seem to have shared thoughts and ideas together which means we cannot rule out some form of discussion prior to writing, nor even some form of correction before sending the letters off to Prague.

- 8) Professor Agostina Marchetti-Dori has said that we must also take into consideration :
- the exceptional rigour, honesty, authenticity, rectitude, single-mindedness, candour, originality, terseness, lucidity, resistance, ability to make objections, fidelity, determination, consistency, strength of mind, firm grip on things, realism and spirituality which we see in her history.^{11(!)}

SOME GENERAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Agnes' monastery was built somewhere between 1232 and 1240 and she probably entered between 1233 and 1236. The Legend of Agnes suggests the following timescale:

1. Agnes meets the friars minor in Prague around 1231
2. she builds them a house, founds a hospital, builds a convent for sisters 1232-1236
3. she asks for and receives 5 sisters from Trent, followers of Clare, to teach her Clare's form of life 1233
4. 11 November 1233 she starts a community with 5 Bohemian noblewomen as well as the Trent sisters
5. Pentecost 1234, Agnes enters, is professed and made abbess by Gregory IX, all in one day

A later date for Clare's letter is favoured by some because she echoes words of Gregory IX to Blanche of Castile (7 June 1235)

I would like to put the first three letters into parallel columns with regard to certain aspects. The 4th letter will be studied separately in the next lesson.



➤	1st Letter	➤	2nd Letter	➤	3rd Letter
Date	between 1233 and 1236, probably 1234.	➤	1234-1238 Clare mentions Br Elias as Minister General, his second term of office was 1232-1239	➤	1238
Theme 5-7	➤ The Exchange Agnes has made in refusing Frederick for Christ, recall that this choice altered the politics of Europe! It parallels Christ's exchange of 2 Cor 8,9.	➤	The Way which is Christ ➤ Clare understood her mendicancy as an inner pilgrimage, and the pilgrim's way was Christ. ➤ The second theme is the suffering Christ. Look at v 20 followed by 'with' used five times in v 21.	➤	Poverty and Humility esp. 4-25 ➤ Here Clare is <i>Ancilla</i> , handmaid, to Christ, while in the other letters it is to the sisters. Note reference to Mt 24, the unprofitable servant who prepares his master's meal before his own – an opening to a letter on fasting? ➤ This letter talks about union and the transformation which follows that

¹¹ Una lettura di Chiara attraverso lo stilo delle lettere, in *Dialoghi con Chiara d'Assisi*, ed. L. Giacometti, Edizioni Porziuncola 1995

Other info	➤ With this letter or another, Clare sent Agnes four small but symbolic gifts.	➤ v21 is the pivot of this letter: <i>If we suffer with him, we shall reign with him ...</i>	➤ Agnes had continually requested permission from the papacy to follow the Form of Life of San Damiano and constantly been refused. As research develops, it becomes clear that she was an immense support to Clare in this struggle.
Note	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> groups of 3, symbolism of Trinity Venerable was the word used to address a laywoman. groups of three, eg virgin, lady, daughter; remember that <i>mulieres or dominae inclusae</i> were women who had taken a vow of chastity but did not belong to an Order. How do you sort this out with all we have seen about Clare and Hugolino, the Benedictine Rule and the Rule of 1223 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> symbolism of 5 wounds groups of 5, daughter, handmaid, spouse, queen, lady/ 'with' 5 times in v21 track the bridal imagery track images of journey leading to the Mansion of v 21 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Gregory IX had imposed Cistercian fasting practices on all the sisters (9 Feb 1237). Francis had not imposed abstinence because the sisters (and friars) were living on food given them
images	➤ of exchange	➤ of journeying, of looking. This letter explains the 'Pilgrimage of Poverty'	➤ of struggle, of supporting, carrying vv 4,8,18-19,24-26
Agnes' situation	➤ - entering religious life, leaving royalty for poverty	➤ - possibly asking for guidance on practicing poverty. Clare was also concerned that the splits of <i>Quo elongati</i> should not overflow between herself and Agnes	➤ - it seems Agnes was in some anxiety, crisis or depression over the endless struggle for poverty and had also asked for guidance on the matter of fasting
Refs to liturgy	➤ Office of St Agnes the Roman Martyr	➤ Office of the Assumption	➤ Feast of Agnes, Annunciation and the motherhood of Mary

THE IMAGERY

Letter One

As we have said, the underlying image is that of **the exchange** or *Commercium* which Agnes has made in imitation of Christ, the Word who emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. This idea goes back through the Council of Ephesus, 431, to 2 Corinthians 8,9, a letter which seems to have been much loved by Clare. After Ephesus, this concept entered into theological thinking about salvation history and Christology. The Fathers saw that it beautifully expresses the mystery mentioned in the very ancient prayer at the beginning of Mass, that Christ came to share in our humanity so that we might be

made sharers in his divinity. Clare would probably have known this prayer which is one of the oldest in the liturgy.

The Latin *Commercium* originally meant that which is given in exchange (hence *commerce*), so came to relate to our response to God. It included exchange in all its meanings, including that of relationships, of love, of goods and between a people and their god, or God. Then it widened further to include an agreement or contract between two people or a people and their God, and thence to the bridal imagery which we find in these letters.

Letter Two

The imagery in letter two is **the bridal imagery** mentioned above which can look like a spirituality that does not sit easily with us today. Instead, we should read and understand it as Francis and Clare did, namely with a strongly theological awareness that the true marriage is that between the Word of God and humanity, and we are all invited to participate in this wedding feast of the Lamb.

The bride, for Clare and Francis, is the faithful soul, the one who becomes God's dwelling place by walking along the **Way** which is Christ our Brother. Francis used to speak about **Friar Christ**. Reflection on the Annunciation led them to see that we are all called to become his mothers – cf Francis' First Letter to the Faithful. Francis saw that the call to be mother, brother, sister and spouse is made to all, men and women alike. In one sense, the fact that Clare's letters are written to a woman obscures this important reality.

Note v 14 in which Agnes is urged to 'pay back' her vows to God, an idea arising out of the same group of ideas. There is a circular line of thought

- 9) from **3**, the Giver,
- 10) to **4-5** the receiver, who
- 11) following the Way **7,12,13**
- 12) returns the gift to the Giver in **14**. Poverty *is* honouring the Most High.

READING

- 4:8 *Clare of Assisi; Early Documents*, ed. & tr. Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap (Franciscan Institute Publications, New York, 1993)
Re-read the Second Letter to Agnes See 4:6 pp5-8

There are many **images of the way** which is Christ. Read the letter looking out for these images of traveling (eg vv 10-13, 19) and remember that this journey will end in the wine-cellar or the heavenly bridal chamber of v 5.

Note too **the image of Rachel**, traditionally the symbol of the contemplative life, the faithful one, the one who was beautiful and more loved by Jacob but less fertile.

'The children of contemplation are less numerous than those of action' says St Bruno 'but Joseph and Benjamin were the more loved by the Father. This is that better part which Mary chose and which will not be taken away from her.'

For the **idea of dust**, see 1C XXVII: 71 and its significance for Francis.

The **core** of this letter is in verse 18, the core of the Gospel calling and the heart of the paradox.

READING

- 4:9 Read 1C XX: 55 for a parallel story.
Francis of Assisi; Early Documents, Vol. I, 1C XX: 55, pp229-230

Agnes is in storm, Elias comes to her in lieu of Francis. Trust in God, Clare is saying to Agnes, even in extreme contrary conditions, even when you have perhaps made some bad mistakes (like stowing away), and God will do for you what he did for Francis. A chart may help, and you can make your own once you grasp how Clare's thought always echoes (on its return journey) the ideas and imagery of the 'outward trip' – thus:

19 the exchange			
	20 The Bridegroom		
		20b the five-fold suffering	
			20c Gaze and imitate
		21 the five-fold empathy	
	22 a place and a name		
23 the exchange			

LETTER THREE

Here the imagery is less clear since the letter falls into two parts without a strong underlying theme. The first part could be called mystical and the second, ascetic. Again there are indications that Agnes is in crisis, even in some depression. Note the questions in vv 9 and 20; note the endearments in vv 10, 11, 30, 40. Agnes was getting nowhere with her desire for most high poverty until, around the time of this letter, 1238, and probably after it, she finally obtained the Privilege of Poverty from the Pope in the bull *Pia credulitate tenentes* dated 15 April 1238.

It is probably easier to pick up themes rather than looking for on-going images:

- 13) God's choice of Mary or Christ as Wisdom,
- 14) There are images of struggle, however, of contest.
- 15) There are bridal references, too. 1, 15-17
- 16) poverty is embraced; 2,7 poverty is wed; taken hold of in 3,7.
- 17) Then the Kingdom is related to poverty in 1,16,20-25, 28-29,
- 18) Is it significant that she starts a letter on fasting with reference to the servant who prepares the master's food before his own? Is Clare that servant?

The first part of the letter falls into three sections: 1. **vv 3-9**; Clare's joy in Agnes, 2. **vv 10 – 19**; Encouragement for Agnes, 3. **vv 20 – 26**; A mansion for God.

The following table may help unpack this dense text:

3-6 – Joy in Agnes	10-11 Encouragement	20-26 a mansion for God
Core: 7 – the hidden treasure	Core: 12-16 – the threefold 'place yourself'	Core: 21-23 the faithful soul is his mansion
8 – like Mary, a co-worker and one who holds	17-19 a virgin and one who holds	24-26 – hold the one who holds you

Note the fourfold conversion process

- v 10** Rejoice – for Francis and Clare this was always a choice we can make, not a chance good mood
- v 11** do not choose bitterness and living in a cloud of gloom
- vv 12-13** place your mind in splendour, glory, in God and transform yourself, meaning choose this transformation so that you may co-operate with God

vv14-19 then you will know what the lovers of God have always known through the ages. You will come to wisdom. Remember what Francis says about Wisdom and her Sisters.

Note verse 8 which in Latin reads that Clare sees her as a helper of God himself and of the ineffable mystical body, and a 'sublevatrix' one who lifts up from the depths. There is an interesting amount of self-help in this letter because Clare, like Francis, was deeply aware that we have choices, though may not always choose to exercise them.

THE SOURCES

One of the main sources quoted or referred to by Clare is the Legend of Agnes, the Roman martyr. In her book: *Clare's Letters to Agnes: Text and Sources*, Joan Mueller osf comments on the popularity of this Legend and tells us about the priest Lambert in Lyon who:

was seeking to combat the worldly doings of urban culture through sermons and example. Particularly he organised communities of pious laity who sought to return a Christian character to the Sunday celebration, instead of desecrating it with minstrels, entertainers and comedians, through drinking, games and indecent songs, dancing and shameless carousing. He prepared his translations and pious essays in the vernacular: for women there was a version of the *Legend of Saint Agnes* and for all of them together there was an edition of the *Acts of the Apostles*, both of them interspersed with his own moral observations and in verse.¹²

The more you read these letters and try to unpack them, the more they will reveal their spiritual wisdom as well as their deep Franciscanism – something not yet mentioned in their connection, but look for 'Franciscan language' for phrases which seem to have been common currency among them in the early days (especially) and which became a kind of 'in' language such as every close knit group has. Note phrases like the following, and you can probably add to this list:

the poor crucified one	poor ladies	most holy poverty
poor in the world	needy and poor	spiritual joy
contempt of the world	treasure in heaven	sister/spouse/mother
nakedness	pearls and gems	poverty of the Lord

¹² Clare's Letter to Agnes, Joan Mueller osf, pp 108

LESSON SIX: LETTER FOUR

AIMS:

To unpack some of the riches of Clare's fourth and last letter to Agnes of Prague and in the process to pick up some of the main themes of her spirituality.

Because this letter, like the other three, was written a long time ago, and because there are huge cultural (and other) leaps to be made before we can hear its full message, it is well worth the labour of writing it out by hand for yourself. This is a very good way of beginning to open a text up for ourselves. The harder we find it to understand, the more necessary it is to take time and trouble. Another advantage is that it gives you a text you can write all over, mark passages and links and echoes and generally make into a mess.

CONTEXT

For Clare – This is a letter of farewell, written to someone who had become a close and dear friend. As far as we know, they never met, although on internal evidence, it is easy to see that their relationship had moved a long way since 1234. Agnes was another great woman and must have been, in some sense, a peer group for Clare, one who understood Clare's struggles and was well placed to make a valuable contribution of her own. Between them, they struggled to persuade the popes to permit what they felt called by the Spirit to live, and in the process worked out a whole theology of contemplation in the new mendicant orders, for this was radically different from the contemplative life of the Benedictine and 'older' monastic orders. While they had to profess the Rule of St Benedict, they were part of the great monastic structure, though never part of the Benedictine Order as such. Their determination to be allowed to profess the Rule of Francis instead of Benedict shows that they were quite clear about not wanting to be part of traditional monasticism. This is important because Clare's sisters are often spoken of, even today, as monastic. We need to be clear what we mean when we say this and not forget that much of Clare and Agnes' pain came from their relentless efforts to move away from being monastic. What being mendicant and contemplative might mean they had to work out as they went along. The many references to the Apocalypse suggest (no more) that the letter was written during Eastertide. The letter must belong to the last months of Clare's life since it tells Agnes that her name-sake, Agnes of Assisi (Clare's blood sister, baptized Catherine) was also in Assisi. We know that this Agnes returned to Assisi from Florence at the start of 1253 in order to be with Clare who they all realized was dying.

For Agnes – the Legend of Agnes of Prague tells us that as soon as her Form of Life was approved, Clare sent Agnes a copy. It is possible, but unlikely, that she sent the text to Agnes of Prague after receiving Cardinal Rainaldo's approval in 1252 – unlikely because Clare apologises for her long silence. This suggests impressive organisation on Clare's part, and also suggests that there might be at least one other letter from her to Agnes, since this letter is clearly not a covering letter for the text of the Rule. This is a letter to Agnes who follows Christ the Lamb (Agnus Dei). On the threshold of death, the Easter resonances fill Clare's mind and hence fill her letter of farewell. But the letter is more than a loving farewell, it is also an instruction on prayer and a guide for the

journey into the wine cellar. It also returns to some of the themes of Letter 3.

THE TEXT

The letter is so rich that it repays annotating and working through carefully.

- v1 Right at the beginning we find the mirror theme adumbrated in Clare's opening words. She and Agnes reflect each other's longing for God, half of my soul, as she says, consciously or unconsciously quoting Cicero. The shrine of her soul is a foretaste of the future, greater shrine of the wine-cellar to which we are all called. In the opening address, Clare gives Agnes seven titles, the number of completion. This is the itinerary of the mystical journey through our human loves to fulfilment in the divine. It maps out a profoundly incarnational Franciscan theology which always starts with the Incarnation or the enfleshed (us) and moves to the divine in a way which sees no conflict between these two. Bearing in mind the place Francis held in Clare's affections, thinking and spirituality, we see that she had truly learnt that each love can open us to further love and the human open onto the divine for us. Right at the start of this letter, she is not afraid to articulate her love and then (v3) to map out the goal of the journey for Agnes.
- v4 Faithful to the stylistic demands, there are 7 phrases beginning with 'O' in this letter. It is the Kingship of God which bestows on Agnes her true queenliness, see vv 4, 7, 8, 15, 17, then 27 and finally the wine cellar in 31.
- v5 At the beginning of their correspondence, Letter 1,31, she had begged prayers *in visceribus Christi*, in the bowels or in the heart of Christ. Here Agnes is again part of her being and she reassures her of that love which burns *in visceribus matris tuae*, in the bowels or heart of your mother – again the theme of human and divine mingling.
- vv7-8 As before, Clare plays with the significance of Agnes' name and her call to follow the Immaculate Lamb, the Agnus Immaculatus to whom she is been wonderfully united. The following verses (9-14) are a hymn about the gifts of God, stressing that those already given are merely a foretaste of what is to come. Clare reflects on the contemplation of Christ, and the effects of prayer on the one who prays. In vv 11,12 note the present tense, these are not gifts or fruits for the future but for now. In the Latin text there is an eightfold use of the word *cuius* – *whose* which echoes the eight references to the mirror (14, 15, 18x2, 19, 22, 23, 24) and eight verbs which map the journey of prayer: 15 – **gaze**, 17 – **adorn**; 18 – **contemplate**; 19 – **turn your mind**; 22 – **consider**; 23 – **contemplate**; 25 – **look**; and finally our task in 25 – **respondeamus, let us respond**. It has been said that all Franciscan prayer begins with the body. Francis begins with listening that becomes hearing, Clare begins with looking that becomes gazing. There is, also, a sense in which this prayer makes fullest sense when read before the San Damiano crucifix. Remember that Clare prayed before it daily. There we see the host of witnesses encouraging us on and surrounding the victorious hero, Christ, into whose face we look to see the truth of ourselves.
- vv15-34 can be read in a way which parallels the traditional stages of prayer:
- vv15-17 describes *lectio*, reading in a way which will lead to contemplation. William of St Thierry said this stage is like putting food into our mouths!
- vv18-23 is *meditatio*, meditation, chewing the food we have taken

vv24-27 *oratio*, praying, making it our own, like swallowing the food and taking it into ourselves, and finally

vv28-34 *contemplatio*, contemplation, we are nourished by the food we have eaten and in consequence continue to grow into our full maturity in Christ.

But this rich passage has many levels and can also be read as a series of identifications:

9-14 – look to the end of the journey

15-18 – identify with Christ in his glory

19-23 – identify with Christ in his pain

24-26 – identify with Christ in his death

27-32 – identify with Christ in the wine cellar

33-34 – let it flow out for others

SOME FURTHER NOTES

1. *on the wine cellar*: William of St Thierry says this is the place where divine wisdom dwells. It is the ultimate place of union. Bonaventure, in his Sermon on St John, says that the kiss is Christ himself, the kiss between the Father and humanity. This is the kiss to which Clare aspires – the happiest kiss, she says, making her own addition to the words of the Song of Songs. In this connection, it would be useful to stop here and read the Privilege of Poverty, printed in the Early Documents.

READING

4:10 Privilege of Poverty 1216 (1PrPov) see reading 3:9

2. *Echoes with Bonaventure*: we do not know if Bonaventure ever met Clare but we do know that he had contacts with the early brothers and we can also see that there are numerous Clarian ideas in his writings which he treats and develops in his own way, but which seem to have too many echoes with Clare to be a coincidence. This is another area awaiting the attention of scholars!
3. *on the wine cellar*: this is the peak of the spousal theme. But note how in Clare all the modes of feminine relating are included (bride, sister, mother, daughter) but always within the framework of paradox. This is even more clear in the matter of poverty.
19) O blessed poverty who bestows eternal riches on those who love and embrace her! (1Ag 15)
4. *the place of joy*: 'A person can only live in joy if she is fed by a faith and a hope such that they relativise the difficulties and limitations of being human; even grief and sorrow, in this perspective, discover a positive significance.'¹³

¹³ *Femminilità e spiritualità nelle lettere di S Chiara: attualità di un tema* by Prof. Angela Ales Bello, publ. in *Dialoghi* pp 299

How do we know Clare and what does she tell us

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LESSON SEVEN: THE LETTER TO ERMINTRUDE, THE BLESSING, THE TESTAMENT

AIMS

To consider some remaining texts: the letter to Ermintrude, the Blessing and then to read and grasp the essential elements of the Testament attributed to Clare.

A. THE LETTER TO ERMINTRUDE

Ermintrude left her homeland in Cologne in 1240 and set out on a pilgrimage which finally brought her to Bruges. There she became a recluse and lived like that for about 12 years. During that time, she heard about Clare of Assisi. Like Agnes of Prague, she was fired by what she had heard and decided to become Clare's disciple. She went to Rome, meaning to visit Assisi en route and meet Clare, but she was too late for Clare had already died. On her return to Bruges, Ermintrude converted her hermitage into a house of Poor Ladies and then founded several other houses in Flanders, all following the form of life of San Damiano. Luke Wadding, in his *Annals of the Order*, tells us that Clare had written her two letters.¹⁴ The text we now know as the Letter to Ermintrude is that given by Wadding, which many commentators consider is someone else's transcript, conflating the two letters from Clare into one. No texts have (as yet) been found to support or confound these theories, but the letter to Ermintrude is usually considered part of the corpus of Clare's writings. It must be said that the style is rather different, many of the familiar themes do not appear, and the vocabulary is also quite different. All these factors serve to keep doubt alive.

READING

4:11 Take time to read and reflect on the letter to Ermintrude

B. THE BLESSING

The texts of the Blessing of Clare run in two groups, those in the second person singular (The Lord bless *thee*) and those in the second person plural (The Lord bless *you*). In the first form, it was sent to both Agnes of Prague and Ermintrude of Bruges and there are three manuscripts extant, one in Latin and two in Medieval German. The plural form seems to be the older in manuscript tradition and also there are more manuscripts of it. In view of the fact that the Blessing is often found in m/s containing the Testament, the Blessing has also come under fire with the latter. The Latin, as always with Clare, is good (better than Francis') it is poetic and uses a wide vocabulary.

It is also a significant text because women rarely gave blessings. After a solemn beginning it becomes much more personal and filled with Scriptural allusions. It is based on the oldest known blessing formula, that of *Numbers* 6, 24-26 which Francis also used. It was widely used in some parts of Italy at that time for the blessing of clerics but also for reconciliation on Holy Thursday. This may have been where Francis and Clare first met this formula. Francis, of course, sent it to Brother Leo who we may be sure, told Clare about it. In this blessing we glimpse her confidence that she had been entrusted by God with a task in the Church and been called as handmaid of Christ, but also as mother and sister of the sisters.

¹⁴ *Ann. Min.*, a, 1257, n.20

READING

4:12 Read the extracts from Leonhard Lehmann's article on the Blessing of Clare.:

4:13 Take time to read and reflect on the Blessing.

C. THE TESTAMENT

As we have seen, grave doubts are being cast today on the authenticity of the Testament of Clare, although there are many notable scholars convinced that the work is either genuinely by Clare or else drawn up soon after her death by the sisters (and possibly Br Leo), jotting down what they knew she wanted them to keep in mind. There are those who believe that one of the manuscripts is written in the hand of Brother Leo. If that could be definitively established, then the situation would dramatically change. For the time being, I shall continue to consider the Testament genuine until proved otherwise and this lesson will proceed on that basis.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE TESTAMENT

1. The Vocation

The heart of the Testament is verse 46

the little flock (cf. Lk12:32), which God the Father has begotten in His holy Church through the word and example of our most blessed father Saint Francis.

This is the description of her vocation and the vocation of all her sisters, to belong to that little flock, begotten by God, an 'ecclesial' flock, begotten in the Church, and generated through the word and example of Francis. There is no ambiguity here; as she says herself, her Form of Life was instituted by blessed Francis.¹⁵ This core text is held between two passages about the poverty of Christ (45,47), two more about the Church and the Order respectively (44,48-51), and two more about the past and the future (40-43,52-55).

2. The Models

On either side of the core text we find two long passages in which she sets out the models to be followed. The first such passage runs from verse 19 – 45. Let us look at them in parallel by way of commentary.

(19) We are examples and mirrors acting out of (59) love of God and of each other. This love is what is to be mirrored (25) out of obedience to Francis and (57) through his teaching. What he teaches us is what he has learnt himself, namely (35) the poverty of the Son of God, which summons us too to live in simplicity, humility and poverty (56). Within this passage, we are instructed about the self-emptying of Christ, Francis' commitment to the sisters, their commitment to poverty and then back again to the self-emptying of Christ. (24-36)

Therefore, she tells us, (37) reflecting on her own weakness with her sisters, and (52) calling upon those who will come after her, her successors,(42) in obedience to the pope and his successors, (50) to Francis and his successors, aware that the Church is always our mother (44) and Francis our father (48) she commits to the Church, to the (44) Pope and Cardinals, that way of life (48) which Francis began, (44) and to *his* successors as well, the friars minor. With (47) Francis' support, she embarks and we with her, on a life time spent following the poverty of Christ (45) the poverty and humility (47) of Christ.

¹⁵ RegCl 1,1

This may seem to us a complicated way of saying something simple. We must remember that for the medieval mind, thinking was much less linear. Manuscripts meant that the whole text could be seen on a page (so to speak) rather like a beautiful piece of calligraphy (which it often was). The most important part of that text – its heart – would be written at the centre. Some think that the Rule was written in the same way, with chapter 6 on *sine proprio* at the heart. Here we find verse 46 at the heart, stating clearly that the ‘religion’ of the Poor Ladies was begotten in the Church by Francis, the father. This contains all the important elements for Clare: that her form of life was instituted by Francis, approved (finally) by the Church and all done in response to the Divine inspiration of the Father of mercies. This gives us some idea of the very visual way Clare had of explaining things. We know she was a skilled needlewoman and she seems to have thought in patterns and design.

3. An Admonition

On either side of this text, like two bookends, we find a short passage of ‘admonition’ or advice. At the front are the words:

Among the other gifts that we have received and receive each day from the Giver of all gifts, *the Father of mercies* and for which we must give all the more thanks to the glorious Father of Christ, ³ there is our vocation; and the greater and more perfect this is, the more are we indebted to Him for it. (2,3)

a reminder again that all this was the work of God’s grace. Also a reminder of the high challenge facing the Poor Ladies after Clare died. It is a passionate summons to be faithful to the poverty and (perhaps even more) the minority, the humility, the lesserness, to which they have been called.

Then at the end

And since *arduous* is the *way* and path and *narrow the gate* through which one passes and enters *into life*, *few there are who find* it and enter through it, the Lord Himself, *who gave us a good beginning, may give the increase* and also *final perseverance* So that this writing be better observed, I bequeath it to you, my most dear and beloved sisters, present and to come, as a sign of the blessing of the Lord and of our most blessed father Francis, and of my own blessing, who am your mother and handmaid (71,78,79)

READING

4:14 Take time to read and reflect on the Testament of Clare

How do we know Clare and what does she tell us

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LESSON EIGHT: THE PROCESS OF CANONISATION AND EARLY EXPANSION OF THE POOR LADIES

AIMS

To consider the Process of Canonisation as a valuable source of information about Clare and her community. At the same time we shall look briefly at the early expansion and development of the Poor Ladies – or Poor Clares as they became known after about 1260.

THE PROCESS

On 18 October 1253, Innocent IV commissioned Monsignor Bartolomeo Accorombani, Bishop of Spoleto, to initiate the investigation into the life, conversion, conversation and miracles of Clare of Assisi, abbess of the monastery of San Damiano. The Bishop put together a team to assist him, which included Archdeacon Leonard of Spoleto, Jacobo priest of Trevi, Brother Leo and Angelo, Br Mark who was chaplain to San Damiano at that time, and a notary. On 24 November 1253 the interviewed thirteen sisters at San Damiano. Then they interviewed four laypeople who had known Clare as a child or young woman, and the next day they met with Ioanni di Ventura who had been night watchman in the Offreduccio household.

We must bear in mind that the sisters who gave evidence at the canonisation Process would have spoken in the Assisan dialect which the notary translated into Latin as he went and then wrote down in Latin. Fortunately, towards the end of the fifteenth century, this text came into the hands of Sr Battista Alfani, Poor Clare in the monastery of S Maria di Monteluca in Perugia. Sr Battista wrote a Life of St Clare and used, among other sources, this canonisation process.¹⁶ The Latin text of the Process has been lost sight of. Fr Giovanni Boccali ofm suggests that it should be sought ‘in Perugia and the Valley of Spoleto, or in Florence or Rome’¹⁷

Note on Sr Battista Alfani: In the middle of the fifteenth century in central Italy, there was a vigorous movement of reform among the Poor Clares. The energy originated with the monastery of S Lucia in Foligno somewhere around 1424/25. The reform spread, first to Perugia (1448) and these two houses collaborated in re-energising as many as 19 other monasteries between 1448 and 1525, mainly in central Italy. The communities were closely connected and gave each other much support, sharing culturally as well as information and documents. In Monteluca in Perugia there was a flourishing scriptorium as well as a number of highly educated sisters, three in particular, all from the Alfani family. Sr Battista was abbess for three terms spanning some six years but was also very gifted artistically and with literary skills. In 1505 it was she who commissioned Raphael to paint the *tavola* of the Assumption which is now in the Vatican.

In 1548 Sr Battista began to keep a chronicle of her monastery, a task which she continued until 1514. She also wrote some seven books, one of which was the Life of St Clare. Another was a collected of *diverse cose* – various things, including most of the text of the Process, translated from the Latin into the Perugian dialect. In 1514 she had a stroke and was paralysed until her death aged 85, on 23 March 1523.

¹⁶ *The Life of St Clare, collected and translated from all the sources*, Quaracchi 1920

¹⁷ *Processo di Canonizzazione di S. Chiara*, Edizioni Porziuncola 2002, p 20

Sr Battista's text was unknown for many years and only published in 1920 by Fr Zefferino Lazzeri. He discovered it in the Finaly-Landau private library and is now in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale of Florence number 251. Much of it is written in the hand of Sr Battista Alfani.

THE WITNESSES

It would take too long to consider each witness separately here but we will look at the first three because they are the more important and significant people.

FIRST WITNESS: SR PACIFICA DI GUELFUCCIO DI ASSISI

Sr Pacifica had lived across the piazza from the Offreduccio household and so she had known Clare as a small child. She was sister to Lady Bona, the seventeenth witness and to some extent an early confidant of Clare's. Pacifica had been a friend of Ortolana, Clare's mother although she says she had never met Clare's father, Favarone, another indication that he might have died earlier. Pacifica and Ortolana had gone on pilgrimage together to the Holy Land, to S Angelo in Monte Gargano and to the tombs of the apostles in Rome.

Pacifica entered 'the Order at the same time' and had been with her most of the time since. It does not seem that she joined Clare at San Paolo or Sant'Angelo, but only when she was settled in San Damiano. She spent a year in the monastery of Spello in Vallegloria 'for the formation of the sisters in that place'.

It seems Pacifica was older than Clare, between her generation and her mother's, it appears. She was a close supporter of Clare though also one who gave her advice, asked and unasked. She was convinced that Clare's illness was the result of her fasting and austerity.

READING

4:15 Read Sr Pacifica's evidence at the Canonisation Process.

SECOND WITNESS: SR BENVENUTA OF PERUGIA

Benvenuta entered in September 1211/12, very soon after Pacifica had joined Clare and Agnes. She and Clare had first met as two small girls in Perugia when Clare's family and the other *maiores* were there in exile during the war in Assisi. She lived with Clare for the next 42 years, took her share of the tasks of the house, noted Clare's practice of poverty, penance and fasting. She was also present at the famous visit of Gregory IX to San Damiano – somewhere before 16 July 1228 – and heard the Pope's suggestion of a dispensation and some property, and also heard Clare's reply. She tells us about a number of cures, perhaps because she was cured herself by Clare in a dream, having lost her voice for almost two years.

READING

4:16 Read Sr Benvenuta's evidence at the Canonisation Process

THIRD WITNESS: SR FILIPPA DI LEONARDO DI GISLERIO

Sr Filippa was the third to enter after Clare and Agnes, in 1215, four years after Clare and at the preaching of Francis and at the words of Clare when she spoke about the Passion. They too had known each other from childhood and Clare seems to have spoken most openly to Filippa. She was a sister with much insight, perceptive and understanding. It is Filippa who tells us about Clare's remarkable dream of Francis, of

the invasion of Saracens and their repulsion by Clare. In addition, many of the other witnesses refer to her testimony rather than give their own accounts.

Like Clare and the early members of the San Damiano community, she was a member of the Assisan feudal nobility. Her father was Leonardo di Gislerio d'Alberico, Lord of Sassorosso. As time went on, however, their catchment area (so to speak) widened and women entered from all social classes and levels, in itself a new thing in religious life.

READING

4:17 Read Sr Filippa's evidence at the Canonisation Process

A GLANCE AT THREE EARLY POOR CLARES

Filippa Mareri Filippa Mareri is particularly interesting because Francis told her about Clare at San Damiano and put them in touch with each other. Francis gave her a *Forma vivendi*, said to have been the same as the one he gave Clare, and put Brother Ruggero of Todi in charge of the community. We know that by 1228 she had transformed her monastery from a Benedictine one into a Franciscan house. On 21 July 1231, Gregory IX confirmed the beginnings of this small community. Filippa died in 1236

Margaret Colonna Born in Rome and orphaned young, she brought up her two brothers. Inspired by the Franciscan movement and influenced by what she had heard of Filippa Mareri, she converted the family home near Palestrina into a monastery of the Urbanist Rule. She died in 1284; her community moved to Rome but were driven out at the Suppression. They found refuge with the Benedictines at S Cecilia in Trastevere where Margaret's relics still rest.

Mattia Nazarei Born in the year Clare died, Mattia refused marriage and wanted to enter the Poor Clare Monastery where her aunt was abbess. This lady was afraid of her sister's reactions so refused. Mattia decided to follow Clare's example and cut off her own hair, clothed herself in rough garments and went to the door of the monastery demanding to be accepted, which she was! At the age of 26 she became abbess, devoted herself to strengthening the spiritual life of her sisters as well as their material well-being 'she was an intelligent and practical woman' says her biographer! The community grew and the monastery expanded. She was known locally as the Loving Mother, because of her warmth and compassion for the poor and distressed.

Other names to explore would be

Agnes of Assisi +1253 (Clare's blood sister) Cunegunda +1291

Salome of Krakow +1268 Yolande +1298

The group of Poor Clares martyred in Tripoli in 1289 and in Acre in 1291.

Much work remains to be done on this period in Poor Clare life.

EARLY EXPANSION OF THE POOR LADIES

In the years after Clare's death, the sisters were generally under the care of the friars but Bonaventure had asked that this be considered a charity not an obligation.

It will be no surprise to learn that the picture of the early expansion of the Poor Clares is extremely unclear. One list of foundations looks like this:

1212 **Assisi**

1216 **Foligno**

1217 **Marseilles, Foligno**

1218 **Perugia, Florence** where Agnes of Assisi was abbess from 1219 until 1253, **Siena** where Benedetta was abbess; **Lucca, Milan** (helped by Br Leo); **Faenza** (helped by Br William the Englishman and Br Bartolo); **Ancona** (helped by Br Paul) **Rome; Salamanca; Palma de Majorca** (but they reverted to the Rule of Hugolino)

It is immediately obvious that these were not ordinary foundations but in many cases existing communities who adopted Clare's Form of Life. What is not clear, and may never be, is the extent to which they were part of Hugolino's group, his Order of the Valley of Spoleto and San Damiano. In some cases it seems the monasteries themselves were not clear, One community asked for the privilege of poverty and obtained it, but the next year we find them accepting property from Gregory IX.

1219 **Siena**; Br John wanted to fund an order of lepers

1220 **Spello; Arezzo; Reims**;

1222 **Camerino**

and so it goes on, each monastery hiding a story of idealism mixed with prayer and pragmatism. Each monastery hiding a story which is, on the whole, yet to be told.

By *1300* there were just over 400 monasteries in all.

Unit Two, Module Four Final Assignment

Write an essay answering one of the following:

1. Analyse the development of Clare's Rule in its various stages throughout her life.
2. How do the letters from Clare to Agnes and Ermentrude help us to understand Clare's Spirituality?
3. How does Clare's Testament differ from Francis's? Analyse its similarities and differences. Comment on their relevance as a spiritual document for Franciscans today.