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**Secular Franciscan Order**

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A SPIRITUAL MESSAGE FOR THE MONTH OF AUGUST 2023.

**St Clare of Assisi – Formator, Spiritual Director**

Almost 800 years ago,<sup>1</sup> St Clare wrote her first letter<sup>2</sup> to Princess Agnes of Bohemia, who had just joined the Ladies of San Damiano convent in Prague, which she had founded.<sup>3</sup> In all, St Clare wrote four letters to St Agnes of Prague. Whatever caused St Clare to write to St Agnes, it has become a great blessing for us because it gives us an insight into Clare's relationship with Christ and her method of transformation through contemplation. St Clare, once called the hidden spring of Franciscan Spirituality<sup>4</sup> today with modern research, gives us a spiritual drink from the pure spring of Franciscan mysticism.

In her Second Letter to Agnes of Prague, Lady Clare summarises her method of formation in gospel spirituality. Like all great mystics, her writing here takes on what can only be understood as the grace of the Holy Spirit.<sup>5</sup> She writes:

*“Most noble Queen,  
gaze, consider, contemplate,  
desiring to imitate Your Spouse.”<sup>6</sup>*

In a simple set of words, Clare sets out her method of formation: **Gaze, Consider, Contemplate.**<sup>7</sup> For her, this is completed by having the *desire to imitate* Christ. This method is not a linear motion, but rather the desire to imitate, makes it a cyclic motion to continue again and again to gaze, consider, contemplate. It is a spiral – a spiritual helix, very much like the Secular Franciscan method of formation and way of life, “Gospel to life, life to Gospel.”

For her, this is the Way.<sup>8</sup> It is the transforming grace of the Holy Spirit that draws us into an ever-deepening relationship with the Son and the Father. The Rule of St Clare clearly says the life of the Poor Clare is “*to observe the holy gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ*” however in her letters, Clare's attention focuses on the very person of Jesus Christ, her Lord and Saviour - her life.

St Clare's very personal and intense method of formation is further developed in her fourth letter to Agnes of Prague, where Clare uses an image very widespread in the Middle Ages - the mirror. She invited Agnes to reflect for herself in that Mirror of the Perfection to discover every virtue – in the Lord himself. She wrote:

***Gaze**<sup>9</sup> upon that mirror each day,  
and continually study your face in it,*

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<sup>1</sup> The four Letters are dated 1234, 1235, 1238 and then fifteen years later 1253. St Clare had her tele-vision Christmas Mass where she saw everything that was happening during the Mass of the Nativity in the Basilica of St Francis in 1252. She died the following year on the 11<sup>th</sup> of August 1253. St Clare was canonized two years later in 1255. St Agnes was not canonized until 1989, by St Pope John Paul II. St Agnes was honored in 2011, the 800th anniversary of her birth, as the Saint who overthrew Communism in her country, with a year dedicated to her in Czechia.

<sup>2</sup> We do not have any letters in reply from St Agnes of Prague to St Clare of Assisi.

<sup>3</sup> St Clare sent five sisters of her community from San Damiano to the new convent in Prague.

<sup>4</sup> Evelyn Underhill, (1875 – 1941) “*We know nothing of St. Clare's mystical experience.*” Essentials of Mysticism. Evelyn Underhill did not have access to the Letters of St Clare.

<sup>5</sup> It is the work of the Holy Spirit to transform us by deepening our relationship with Christ. Hopefully, that is why we joined the Franciscan Order in the first place.

<sup>6</sup> The Latin is: *regina praenobilis, intuere, considera, contemplare, desiderans imitari.*

<sup>7</sup> In Clare of Assisi: The Lady, p. 49 footnote b: only three words of her method are listed: Gaze, Consider, Contemplate. In her Fourth Letter St Clare gives a fuller explanation of her way of her method of formation.

<sup>8</sup> “*I am the way the truth and the life.*” (John 14:6) In her Testament St Clare tells us: “*The Son of God has become for the way that our blessed father Francis, his true lover and imitator, has shown and taught us by word and example.*”

<sup>9</sup> The Latin word Clare uses is *intuere* which means [gaze upon] or as she also says look [look upon]

*that you may adorn yourself completely,  
 within and without,  
 with the garments of all the virtues.<sup>10</sup>  
 In that mirror,  
 blessed poverty, holy humility, and inexpressible charity  
 shine forth  
 as, with the grace of God,  
 you will be able to contemplate them  
 throughout the entire mirror.*

**Look<sup>11</sup>** *at the poverty of Him,  
 who was placed in a manger  
 and wrapped in swaddling clothes.  
 O marvellous humility!  
 O astonishing poverty!  
 The King of angels,  
 the Lord of heaven and earth,  
 is laid in a manger!  
 Then **reflect<sup>12</sup>** upon,  
 the holy humility,  
 the blessed poverty,  
 the untold labours and punishments  
 that He endured for the redemption of the whole human race.*

*Finally, **contemplate<sup>13</sup>** in the depth of this same mirror,  
 the ineffable charity  
 that He chose to suffer on the tree of the cross  
 and to die there, the most shameful kind of death.*

*May you, therefore,  
 be inflamed ever more strongly with the fire of love!  
 As you further **contemplate**  
 His ineffable delights, riches and perpetual honours,  
 and, sighing,  
 may you cry out  
 from the great desire and love of your heart:<sup>14</sup>*

*In your love, may the tongue of the flesh be silent;  
 may the tongue of the Spirit speak.*

NOTE: As presented here, the text of St Clare's letter has a great deal removed to give it a more modern and direct reading. Please see Footnote 13 if you wish to read the original.

Fr John Cooper OFM Cap  
 National Spiritual Assistant

PLEASE, DISTRIBUTE THIS MESSAGE TO YOUR FRATERNITY,  
 INCLUDING ISOLATED MEMBERS

<sup>10</sup> The Virtues are seen as the wedding garments of heaven the contrasting Vices are the garments of hell.

<sup>11</sup> Here Clare actually uses the Latin word *attende* translated as "look" however, today in counselling "attending" is much more than "look at a person" but rather be aware of everything about that person as they are presenting to you.

<sup>12</sup> Clare uses the Latin word *considera* translated here as "reflect."

<sup>13</sup> *Contemplate* and *desire* and *love* [Him].

<sup>14</sup> Perhaps the best translation of the Letters of St Clare is found on the internet at the following address because it gives the English and the Latin original: [The Fourth Letter to Agnes of Prague: CA:ED, p. 55 \(franciscantradition.org\)](http://www.franciscantradition.org)