

Traditions of Spiritual Guidance

CLARE OF ASSISI

By FRANCES TERESA DOWNING

IN AN ORDER WHICH LACKS ANY OVERT TRADITION of giving direction to others and whose foundress was born eight hundred years ago, leaving us only four letters, a Rule and a Testament, it might seem rash to try to talk about our tradition of spiritual guidance – especially when many readers of this article will be well-versed in other traditions. On the other hand, a great deal of spiritual guidance has certainly gone on in Poor Clare parlours over the centuries, and there are undoubtedly attitudes and insights rooted in Clare's life and writings which reveal themselves through phrases like: Clare says; Clare taught; Clare found.

Although there is much study yet to be done on Clare's letters, they do seem to have been written for the purpose of giving guidance. They were only discovered relatively recently, by Achille Ratti, later Pius XI, when he was librarian at Milan. It was he who somehow established that the parchment in his hand had been written in Prague between 18 January 1283 and 8 November 1322. Scholars are still finding their way into the theological universe of the letters and there is much to be learnt, not least about the thirteenth-century conventions governing correspondence between two educated, aristocratic women in positions of leadership. Yet a great deal can be said with confidence, and language barriers are falling as we realize how deeply rooted in Scripture Clare was and how steeped in Francis' writings. Certainly her letters are not just mystical outpourings of little relevance, though at first they can seem fairly impenetrable.

The fundamental insight of Clare, as of Francis, is that God has, freely and out of goodness, called us all into the life of the Trinity as sisters and brothers of the Son and of each other, and through this movement we repair the Church. The specific contribution of Clare is her profound awareness of the *kenosis* of the Word made flesh. The focus of this *kenosis* is Paradise. Franciscan thinking, at least since Scotus, has maintained that Christ would have become human even had there been no sin, and today the call is still the same: to come to the glory of God by treading the way of Christ's poverty – a reverse journey, so to speak. Bearing in mind the disadvantages of separating a 'spirituality' from a 'life', we can say that from this Clare developed a spirituality of glory which was remarkable, and remarkably incarnational.

Co-workers of God

The gift of God for which we have most cause to give thanks, said Clare, is our vocation, our call.¹ Here she is talking not only about a vocation to

religious life in the restrictive sense but also about the universal call to be the recipients of God's gifts. We are all invited to experience how good God is, and this optimistic approach is summed up in Clare's image of the mirror. The Word mirrors the Godhead to us and we have been set by the Lord as mirrors and examples to each other, reflecting what we ourselves have seen.² Her stress was always on experience rather than on concepts: we discover for ourselves how good God is and she can urge us to do this with confidence because of her own experience. So any kind of guidance, to Clare's mind, must be able to call on the experience of the guide. Put like that, it sounds a basic requirement of common sense, and certainly she and Francis used their experience as a paradigm. The basic act of God was to give them brothers and sisters, not by way of a trial but as the beginning of the restored kingdom and the start of a whole new way of living human life. The initiative was God's.

Everything else followed from this. All her life Clare maintained that Francis had taught her about Jesus Christ,³ especially about Christ poor and humiliated on the cross. Christ is the way, she said, and Francis showed it to me,⁴ and as a result, she and her first sisters 'willingly bound ourselves to our Lady, most holy Poverty'.⁵ Poverty, as Clare understood it, was a deep dedication to Christ as well as a personalization of the only one who actually shared the cross with him.⁶ Then on this Christ-centred canvas she drew unique lines of spiritual guidance by examining our relationships with God and people.

This relational approach gives her thought a very feminine character. Her images are often women's images, to do with nurturing and tending, with mirrors and sensitivity to beauty, with motherhood in God, with nourishing each other, with grieving over the pain of others. Her thought is very coherent, less idiosyncratic than Francis', as if her Palm Sunday flight from home had generated such a degree of commitment to Christ that the rest of her life was simply a deepening of insights already perceived. Although Francis influenced her greatly, her main ideas were undoubtedly her own, and she was well able to differ from him (over money, for example, and clothing – which may mean hygiene). She constantly reflected on what had happened to her, not assuming that others' path must be the same but learning from it about the workings of God. Her insights into poverty in particular were all-embracing and she took it for granted that the gifts given were to be shared and not only with the sisters,⁷ for we are told that she 'begot many sons and daughters in Jesus Christ, as is seen today'.⁸

One of her outstanding characteristics was her love for the world and everything in it. She also believed that the 'treasure without equal is hidden in the field of the world and in human hearts'.⁹ This meant that she saw the ordinary details of human life as filled with God. People are good and God is hidden in them, and just as God works from within to strengthen those who find it all too much, so must we work from without.¹⁰ She developed this from Paul's statement that we are co-workers of God; this is a call to be life-givers, like God, to be examples and mirrors to everyone and especially to support

those who stumble.¹¹ As co-workers of God we are at God's disposal and in this way those early sisters expressed and experienced their mendicancy. On the most profound level, they were true pilgrims, travelling light.

In one sense Clare saw everything as a matter of exchange, as the *admirabile commercium* of the Christmas liturgy. Christ 'chose to appear despised, needy and poor in this world so that those who lived in utter poverty and destitution, and in absolute need of nourishment from heaven, might become rich in him'.¹² It was an exchange of love: let us love him totally who gave himself totally for us;¹³ or in the words of the Song of Songs: 'I will not let you go until . . .' With time and reflection, poverty gained even greater depth as Francis and Clare pondered on the self-emptying of Christ's passion. For Clare the process went still further when she saw the features of Christ's passion in the stigmata on Francis' own body, those mysterious wounds on his hands and feet and in his side. These wounds bled and were painful and, for those close to Francis, it seemed as if they were actually watching redemption at work in their midst, as if the passion were being enacted before their eyes. They were profoundly affected by what they saw and the incarnation of Christ gained that immediacy which has marked Franciscan spirituality and theology ever since.

Mothers of Christ

Like the early friars, the Poor Ladies of San Damiano set out to live as much like Christ as possible, obeying the gospel literally and sometimes quixotically, imitating Christ in every detail, taking Mary as a model for the inner attitudes of their hearts. Clare, particularly, found in Mary a well of contemplative tenderness, and seems to have felt a certain spiritual parallel between what Mary was to Christ in his public life, and what she herself was for Francis. This deepened and intensified when they brought Francis' ruined body for her to see. The echoes of Mary receiving her Son's body from the cross could not have passed Clare by, nor did they fail to resound throughout her spirituality.

From their admiration for Mary, Francis and Clare developed a remarkable theology. Mary was the model Christian. She was invited into a generative union with the Spirit which issued in the birth of the Word made flesh, and it is this birth which regenerates the Church and the world. Mary was therefore the bride and the spouse of the Spirit and the mother of Christ. She became – in Francis' surprisingly Vatican-II-sounding words – the virgin made Church.¹⁴ In other words, she was the prototype of the Church whose mission is to bring Christ to birth in the world through union with the Spirit. When we imitate Mary, we walk this same road. We are all, men and women alike, 'virgins made Church' when we are drawn into this union with the Spirit and bring Christ to birth in new hearts. So the apostolic fruitfulness of Mary is ours, individually and collectively; we, though many, work together at the one work of bringing forth the one Christ in many lives.

We, like the Church, are the mother, sister and spouse of God, like Mary. These three roles, which are the calling for each of us, focus on our

relationship with Christ, but we enter them through the Holy Spirit, through what Francis called God's 'holy manner of working'. We carry Christ, he said, in our hearts and bodies and we give birth to him through his holy manner of working.¹⁵ Mary was like Christ's doorway into human nature just as she is our doorway into the Trinity, and in herself gives us a model for our own relationship within the Trinity. Francis first spoke about this with the sisters very early on, saying in the short *Formula vitae* which he wrote for them: 'By divine inspiration you have taken the Holy Spirit as your spouse'.¹⁶

That this became a basic insight of wide application is borne out by the fact that Francis developed the idea in a further letter, not to the sisters but to all the faithful. A further twenty years later, we find Clare saying it in one of her letters in almost the same words.¹⁷ Between them they weave into our relationship with God a tapestry of insights through which we become his dwelling place and his throne (Clare). We are spouses when we are united to Christ by the Spirit. We are brothers and sisters when we are united with him in doing the Father's will (Francis). But if spouse, then mothers also. We are mothers when we give birth to him in the lives of others by example (Francis). This fruit is given to our single-mindedness, for when we bestow our affections on the transient, we lose the fruit of love (Clare, playing off *diligere* and *caritas*).

Speaking about this universal vocation to fruitfulness, Eckhart, writing some years later, has a symbolic passage of wondrous confusion:

If man were to be virgin always, no fruit could ever come from him. To become fruitful it is necessary for him to be a woman. 'Woman' is the highest attribute that can be given to the soul, and is much higher than 'virgin'. That man receive God into himself is good, and in this receptivity he is virgin. But it is better when God becomes fruitful in him. This becoming fruitful through the gift is alone the thankfulness for the gift. In this, the spirit is a woman in reproductive gratitude, where Jesus is reborn in God's paternal heart.¹⁸

In an age which was far less hung up about sexuality than ours, this kind of preaching seems to have been possible. What appears to be happening for us today is that we hunger for teaching about these matters because God's holy manner of working goes on, the Spirit continues to invite us to union and fruition, and we are experiencing a need for guidance. We are not finding it in Victorian spiritual writers but it is to be found, when unwrapped, in writers from a simpler and less neurotic age. This is surely part of the reason for the great popularity of writers like Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, Hildegard and others. Certainly this theology of spiritual motherhood gave Clare a language to express her own experience; at the same time it is interesting to note that she was never maternalistic with her sisters but remarkably consultative – by any standards. In the Rule alone she spoke of herself as a sister some sixty-six times and as an abbess only a handful of times. To be sister was her basic relationship, to be mother of Christ her spiritual calling.

Developing that, she says to us: 'If a mother love and nourish her daughter according to the flesh, *how much more* lovingly must a sister love and nourish her spiritual sister?'¹⁹ Motherhood has been replaced by the nurturing and self-sacrificing love of Christ as the ultimate in human love. 'I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you' (Jn 13:15) – something far more challenging. Now we are not only to love like a mother feeding and looking after her children (1 Thess 2:7) but much more. Nor will it do to hope that this is just for the Poor Clares, because Clare knew that the Lord had called her to be a mirror and example to all the world. This is the kernel of her teaching: the example of Christ's total self-giving is the standard for us all.

Clare's realization that she was to be an example and mirror for everyone in the world follows logically from the example of Christ. Nor is she using the phrase 'in the world' in contradistinction to religious life which until recently was apparently out of this world. Clare means, quite simply, everyone. It is our calling, she says in her Testament, to demonstrate how to work with 'talents' and not bury them in the ground. Those who are called to observe the gospel by living in obedience, without anything of their own and in chastity are to be exemplars, but everyone is called to live the gospel. There was a whole series of such exemplars in Clare's universe in which Christ looks to the Father and is an example for us; Francis looked to Christ and was an example for Clare; she looked to Christ and Francis and is an example to us, as to her sisters. We in our turn look to Christ so as to be an example to others in the world, and they in their turn . . . This is what she means by standing together with the one by whom all things are held together.²⁰

A spirituality of glory

The essence of Clare's vision of spiritual living is total love.²¹ Poverty is another way of saying this because it imitates the total self-giving of Christ. He made himself poor for us in this world, he emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave (Phil 2:7), and Clare saw that we are all invited to share this glory by sharing in this emptying of ourselves. To possess, to own or to have power over anything, is to shore ourselves up against the pain of this emptiness. It is the possessing, not the thing possessed, which wounds us, because possessiveness precludes glory. To appropriate anything to ourselves, Francis taught, is to exalt ourselves and thereby to remove ourselves from the true exaltation of Christ. It is to generate a hollow and false kind of 'being lifted up' which is quite other than being lifted up with Christ on the cross which is our true glory. On the cross, glory came to Christ; it was his hour.

One of the areas where Clare gives us really helpful teaching is in her example of how to hold the Godhead and the wounded humanity of Christ in a right tension. She never lost sight of the full stature of Christ but encompassed both the pain of his humanity and the glory of his Godhead in the one perspective. As she saw it, both are offered us, shared with us, a precondition and a consequence of being led into the richer meaning of the incarnation. As

we learn to see the world transformed and to shed our more materialistic values, we come to John's recognition of the glory in Christ's hour on the cross. This is no esoteric teaching for the few, but the result of God's loving and generous outpouring of grace: she advises us:

Place your mind before the mirror of eternity!
Place your soul in the brilliance of glory!
Place your heart in the image of the divine substance!²²

Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance, or, as it could be translated: Set your heart on the image of the divine substance, namely Christ. We become Godlike and Godly but not God, not the divine substance itself. The image of the divine substance is Christ, the brilliance of glory and the mirror of eternity. Clare's spirituality and her theology are a lovely example of the fruits of prolonged reflection on the incarnation and the way in which the whole universe is transformed because the Word became flesh. If she learnt from the Letter to the Hebrews and from Paul about the glory on the face of Christ, she seems to have learnt from John to see this glory on the wounded face of Jesus. Her letters are filled with most tender phrases about the passion of Christ, even while they overflow with words like brightness, radiance, beauty, the fire of love, splendour, brilliance of eternal light.

The wounded humanity of Jesus is our way. 'Christ is the way and Francis showed it to me.' Jesus was lifted up on the cross like a mirror hung at the roadside. The wonder is that the reflections of this mirror lead us to reflect upon it and so to reflect it. We cannot gaze on Christ without becoming Christlike, without, in Clare's words, carrying him spiritually in our body.²³ Such a maternal possession reveals the transitory nature of all other ownership. Through pondering in our hearts as Mary did, we place our minds before the Mirror of eternity and are made bright in its brightness, we are transformed into the image of the Godhead itself. We share in God's own fruitfulness and taste the hidden sweetness which God has reserved for those who love him.

She learnt this, it seems, from her own experience, but found its articulation in St Paul: 'We, with unveiled faces reflecting like mirrors the brightness of the Lord, grow brighter and brighter as we are turned into the image we reflect' (2 Cor 3:18). Could anybody named Clare, *Clara* in Latin, be impervious to a text which read: *in eandem imaginem transformemur a claritate in claritatem, tamquam a Domino Spiritu* (2 Cor 3:18)? It was like a definition of her life and spirituality, the image reflected in her daily life refracted by contemplation, making her more and more herself, *a claritate in claritatem*.

Guidelines for prayer

If there is any one text in Scripture which encapsulates Clare's attitude to Christ and Christian living, it is surely John 13:15: 'I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you'. How in our prayer are we to do this? How are we to bring this quite 'high' teaching of Clare's

down to the gravelly path of ordinary life? Clare was even more of a pragmatist than Francis, and she knew quite well that the daily life is the sterling experiment of our spirituality. Francis used to say that what we are before God is what we are – in short, not much. He also said that when those who we think ought to be nice to us, fail to be so, then the truth of ourselves is revealed to ourselves (and to others, perhaps). The experience of let-down, anger, rejection and so on, surfaces the hidden truth in our hearts just as heat brings an abscess to a head. If we seriously want to live Christ's life, then we shall be pleased at this because it reveals to us what work we need to undertake.

Clare was of the same pragmatic turn of mind and, in all spiritual guidance, would certainly have asked questions about relationships in daily life. She talks about them in her Rule, advising her sisters and her successors as abbess not to be disturbed or angry by another's sin, because the sin of others does not prevent love in us as much as anger and disturbance do. She gives strong advice about asking for and giving forgiveness.²⁴ She warns us to be on our guard against pride, empty glory, jealousy, greediness, care and anxiety about temporal things, taking away the characters of others, muttering, being out of harmony with others, cherishing divisions: quite a realistic list.²⁵ She also insists that we take full responsibility for ourselves, copying Francis in saying that if we are commanded to do something which we believe to be 'against our soul'²⁶ then we should not do it. This is all part of her conviction about personal responsibility, which also led her to require a meeting 'at least once a week'. There, beginning with the abbess, everyone is to ask for forgiveness. All these injunctions are to do with relationships because, in depth, it is to this that we are called. This is where the trinitarian prototype finds its expression in our lives. In an ideal world, all our human relationships would mirror trinitarian ones and we would reflect the glory of God to each other. The power of Francis and Clare is that they truly believed that our obedience in Christ can begin to effect this. Their magic is that sometimes they can almost convince us of this, too.

The heart of Clare's teaching on prayer is summarized in one passage of her last letter, written only a few months before she died. Here she starts by repeating that what God wants is to give us joy, not as a reward for good behaviour but as a gift. The one who has been given this, she says, is indeed a happy person, for the more we glimpse of God's beauty, the more rapt in it we shall become until gradually all our wayward heart falls into line. Her words are: 'How very happy is the person who has been granted to cleave with every fibre of their heart to one so beautiful that the heavenly hosts of the blessed never grow weary of wonder'. This is gift to us from God but it is also a gift from us to God. It is God's love which awakens love in us just as it is God's glory that glorifies us and makes us the *claritas* on the face of Christ. She goes on:

By such contemplation we are renewed,

by such kindness, flooded,
 by such sweetness, filled.
 We are gently enlightened by such a memory.
 God is a fragrance to bring the dead to life again,
 a vision of such glory as to make all the citizens of the heavenly
 Jerusalem blessed.

She then gives us a whole programme of prayer summarized in a series of verbs:

look into this mirror of Christ daily,
ponder there your own face,
see what you need to become ready for God,
contemplate in this mirror Christ and his stupendous poverty,
look at his work on our behalf,
consider his humility,
contemplate his love,
consider, look and contemplate.

Consider, look, contemplate, a programme for prayer and for life. We have already seen the connection she made between reflecting upon and reflecting, and here it is at work again. Looking at Christ, we see how to imitate him. Imitating him, we become like him. Like him, we reflect him and bring him to birth in the lives of others. This is what is meant by observing the gospel.

NOTES

¹ Testament of Clare 2. The translation of Clare's writings throughout is my own, and the numbering follows that of the Latin text of Becker, Godet and Matura: *Écrits* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1985). All Francis' and Clare's writings can be found in Regis Armstrong OFM Cap (trans and ed), *Francis and Clare, the complete works* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), hereafter cited as Armstrong. Documents relating to the early Poor Clares as well as Clare's own writings can also be found in Regis Armstrong OFM Cap (trans and ed), *Clare of Assisi: early documents* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1988), hereafter cited as *Early documents*.

² Cf Letter 3:12, Testament 19.

³ Canonization Process, Witness 12:3 (*Early documents*, p 172).

⁴ Testament 5.

⁵ Testament 39.

⁶ *Sacrum commercium* 21. The full text is in M. A. Habig (ed), *Francis of Assisi: omnibus of sources* ((Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973), p 1549.

⁷ Canonization Process, Witness 1:9.

⁸ Canonization Process, Witness 20 (*Early documents*, p 175).

⁹ Letter 3:7.

¹⁰ Letter 3:7, 8.

¹¹ Testament 19, 20.

¹² Letter 1:19, 20.

¹³ Letter 3:15.

- ¹⁴ Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Armstrong, p 149).
- ¹⁵ Letter to all the faithful 1:10 (Armstrong, p 63).
- ¹⁶ This Form of Life was probably written in 1212 or 1213 (Armstrong, p 44).
- ¹⁷ Letter 1:12.
- ¹⁸ Eckhart, Sermon on St Matthew.
- ¹⁹ Rule 8:16.
- ²⁰ Letter 3:36.
- ²¹ Cf Letter 3:22 and 23; 4:11.
- ²² Letter 3:12 and 13.
- ²³ Letter 3:25.
- ²⁴ Rule 9:7.
- ²⁵ Rule 3:4; 7:2; 8:1; 9:5, 7; 10:6, 8, 9.
- ²⁶ Rule 10:3.