

ANGLICAN AND FRANCISCAN?

By GILLIAN CLARE AMIES

IN THE LAST FEW YEARS I have been invited, as a member of the Anglican Community of St Clare, to share sessions with Poor Clares and other Franciscans in Belgium and France. I have been asked more than once, 'How can you be both Anglican and Franciscan?' The short answer is that it was from the Anglican Church that we learned the gospel. Francis and Clare both begin their Rules by saying that the Rule is this: to observe the holy gospel. This is something that all Christians share, so they go on to specify the ways in which the brothers and sisters are to observe it; it is the gospel which is central.

Although this gospel-centredness is something that is common to all Christians, we all read the gospel with our own spectacles. If they are rose-coloured, perhaps we are missing something, but we can fairly read it with spectacles from east or west, from Africa or Europe, from North or South America, spectacles that are Lutheran, Calvinist or Anglican as well as Roman Catholic. I would like to think that in our community we read it through spectacles that are Franciscan rather than Dominican or Benedictine, however attractive those traditions may be. What stands out is the generosity of God.¹ Everything is seen as gift: the world of nature, our brothers and sisters in community, the various experiences that come along. God's love is seen as life-giving, in creation, in the love of God who gave his Son, in Christ's love shown in the manger and on the cross. Behind all this lies the interchange of love in the Trinity. This love, and joy in response to it, is the attraction, and as we read the gospel through our Anglican spectacles, it is possible to be immersed in attention to this quality of life, a quality which can be appreciated regardless of questions of jurisdiction.

The response to this love can be seen in terms of Clare's theme of the mirror. This takes up the theme of the end of the third chapter of the second letter to the Corinthians – becoming like the one we gaze at. Francis' love for the lepers, for the outcast, reflected the love he saw expressed in the manger and on the cross. In a similar way Br Douglas, one of the founders of the Anglican Society of St Francis (of which we are the Second Order), was said to have a homing instinct for misery. This simplicity of response can be seen in children watching a puppet show as

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their faces reflect what is happening. One personal memory, from a visit to Belgium, is of a Poor Clare from Zaïre beating a drum while one from Burundi danced and I gazed at her and then, at her request, tried to keep her company. I suppose that any Christian feels that our response to the gospel is as crude as I felt my attempt at African dancing to be. This is one thing that makes for a life of penitence: the awareness of the gap between what we see and our response.

On my travels I have had to try to explain how very small our communities are when compared with the Roman Catholic Orders. One regular response is that it is not size but quality that counts. So far I have refrained from saying that this answer is not quite as comforting as it is meant to be. We would not want to claim to correspond to what we glimpse 'in a glass darkly'. I have not answered in that way partly because I think that St Paul had a good point when he said that he did not judge himself and partly because it seems to get back to focusing too much attention on ourselves. It is better to get on with life as simply as possible, and leave it to others to see the truth for themselves.

One positive advantage of being Anglican and being inspired by the Franciscan vision is that we had to start from scratch. The Society of St Francis dates from the profession of the first brothers in 1931 and the Community of St Clare from the profession of the first sisters in 1950. When I have heard lectures on the writings and story of Clare, I have been aware that we have been living through the same early stages of community life as she did. The precarious nature of new beginnings is one form of poverty that we have been able to share with Francis and Clare and their contemporaries. But while we drew inspiration from Francis and Clare we have never tried to imitate the details of their way of life or of the life that has evolved over the centuries. An example about our enclosure – which has always made quite enough impression on our families and those who visit us – will illustrate the point. When our new chapel was being built in 1959 and the Minister of the brothers asked whether we were to have grilles in chapel and parlour, our Mother replied that we would have grilles when the friars had the tonsure. She heard no more about grilles. Since Vatican II we have been particularly glad that we did not imitate that detail. From the beginning we felt it right to allow for visits to sick or aged parents. On the other hand we wear fairly traditional habits, in drip-dry material, because we find them practical. One point in which we do want to resemble Clare's life is in her closeness to the ordinary people of the region. We see our life as very ordinary, simplified perhaps so as to show the God-centred nature of any Christian life, but essentially ordinary, with housework, gardening, work

to earn a living (by printing and baking communion wafers) and all the daily routine of living together. The printing includes some for local firms and people, as well as Christmas and other cards. This way we meet people in circumstances which they can understand with the opportunity to dispel some of their fantasies about us. Ours is not a life that is directed to visible achievements, and this too means that we are not distanced from others, from the *minores*, with whom Francis and Clare chose to be associated. When I think of our discussions of the elements of our life, it seems to me that if we are recognizably Franciscan (and people say that we are) it is by a sort of serendipity ('the faculty of making happy and unexpected discoveries by accident'!²) rather than because of any deliberate imitation. I would like to think that this comes from an affinity with the spirit of Francis and Clare which lies deeper than mere imitation and which leads to appropriate choices through attention to the present moment and our own deepest understanding.

It is an interesting thought that our Anglican experience of the Church may in some ways be close to that of Francis and Clare. The population in their day was much smaller; the great missionary expansion had not taken place; Rome and the pope were for them close at hand. It was all on a comparatively homely scale. For us too the centre of our Church is near at hand, and it is small enough for us to feel closely in touch with much that goes on. This, of course, has nothing to do with the issues that divide the churches nowadays, but when it comes to experience, theirs may not be as far removed from ours as we may think.

One echo of history has occurred recently. In the Middle Ages the friars created the need for breviaries. A few years ago our brothers and Franciscan sisters edited their own Office Book, one which could be used with the Alternative Service Book of the Church of England but which supplemented it. This was used by many other people. When a revision became necessary, the Liturgical Commission of the Church of England wished to be involved as it provided a chance to try things out before the forthcoming revision of the Alternative Service Book. The result has been a new Office Book for the Society of St Francis, used now by all three Orders, and another edition, almost identical, for general use. The specifically Franciscan version has now sold out and the general edition has already been reprinted a number of times. It has clearly been a service to the Church of England, and expresses the importance to us all of community life and its centre and expression in worship.

Another advantage of our situation is that our communities are all small. There are our First Order brothers, our Franciscan sisters, the Third Order (secular Franciscans) and ourselves. Because we are so

small, we can be aware of each other as a family, a family of communities, but also a family in which we can know many individuals. There is the possibility of and need for mutual support. Our brothers who are priests (perhaps in due course sisters who are priests will visit too) come in turn to spend a month or so as our chaplain. This keeps us in touch with the rest of the Society and the work in different areas. In January each year the brothers and our Franciscan sisters in turn hold their chapter meetings at our guest house. Again this is a chance for us to meet them and to be in touch. They use the guest house for other things too: for instance, the third-year novices of the brothers and sisters usually come to spend a week there together as they approach first vows. The First and Third Order use the guest house for retreats, both as individuals and in groups, and there are many other ways of contact and exchange. On a practical level we do a lot of printing for the First and Third Orders. This family life is always finding new ways of expression. It also brings us links with other parts of the world: with the brothers' houses in Papua New Guinea and the Solomons, in Australia and New Zealand, in America and Africa, our sisters in America, Australia and New Zealand, and with the members of the Third Order in other countries, of whom Desmond Tutu is the best known.

Clare's poverty has been described as 'the privilege of living without privileges'.³ Perhaps an established church has particular need of some people within it who attempt to live out of such a vision. Whether we succeed in communicating it is another matter. It is not easy to look as if you are without privileges. For Clare's form of poverty manual work was important, a form of identification with the '*minores*'. For us to work to earn a living is important and has a positive value. The sisters at San Damiano made things to give away and then confidently expected gifts in return.⁴ We have not yet found this possible in every area, but we can at least offer hospitality without charge and expect enough in the way of gifts to cover the guesthouse's expenses. But above all poverty is dependence on God and a consequent self-giving without thought of gain or reward. This at least is something to aim at. It also provides constant reminders of the interweaving of our life with that of the rest of the Church, for often we receive from God through others and our self-giving can find expression towards others.

Neither the First nor Second Orders of the Society of St Francis had a single founder. Jean Vanier wrote recently that certain problems could be avoided where there was a founding group rather than a single person.⁵ Perhaps it has made it easier to try to follow Clare's more democratic way of community life. It has been said that the Franciscan

family's greatest gift to the Church is the value that it sets on persons and on sensitivity to them.⁶ England has a great tradition of eccentrics, so perhaps this is a congenial aspect of the Franciscan way. David Jenkins has described the perfect community as 'that you should be you in such a way that your being you enables me to be me'.⁷ It is never easy to accept differences and to accept wholeheartedly the persons who differ from us, but this is surely what Clare meant when she told her sisters to love one another with the charity of Christ.

I said earlier that we had not tried to imitate the details of Poor Clare life. This has been true of all three Orders. None of the three Orders of the Society of St Francis began by trying to copy exactly the three Franciscan Orders in the Roman Catholic Church. A recent study by a tertiary of early attempts to found a Third Order in the Anglican Church has demonstrated how very far they were from any attempt at imitation.⁸ Our own community wrote its own Rule, inspired by Clare, but with no precise likeness. The First Order's Rule had a similar relationship to Francis. The names of the communities also reinforce this perception. We called ourselves the Community of St Clare, declaring an orientation, but also making clear that we were not claiming to be Poor Clares in the way that that name would have suggested at the time. Moreover it would not have been ecumenical to claim that name in 1950. In more recent years the Poor Clares in this country have invited us to meetings of the Association of St Clare, and the Protomonastery in Assisi has included us in the list of Poor Clare monasteries throughout the world as 'Poor Clares of the Anglican Church'. The changes since the 'return to the sources' after Vatican II and the revolution in attitudes to ecumenism have made it thinkable for our way of life to be recognized in this way. In any case, it is much better to have such recognition come unsolicited than to have aimed at it deliberately.

In the Church of England the whole question of liberty and obedience in the Church presents itself in a distinctive way. There is no canon law on the religious life, so our responsibilities take a different form. The Church of England recognizes religious communities, gives them seats in the General Synod, and takes an interest in them, but allows them considerable freedom. There is an Advisory Council, but it is advisory. If we wish to choose this way of life, a contemplative life which withdraws us from some ways of service and contact with the rest of the world, and to choose it as our way of finding freedom, we are able to do so. We then need constant vigilance: We are free to do as Clare said, and go out only for some useful, reasonable, manifest and praiseworthy purpose. It is for

us to decide what occasions meet these criteria. There is no escape from examining the questions. (One Roman Catholic friend suggested that the Anglican Church was needed as a research and development branch.) In other areas it means listening to each other (obedience is tied up with listening) and to the rest of the Church to discern what the Holy Spirit is saying to us through this part of the Body of Christ in which we have been placed and where we have heard the gospel. Clare wanted her sisters to be a support for the weak members of this Body. We hear this and apply it in the circumstances of our own life. The concern to listen to each other in the community and in the Church is Franciscan enough. Both Francis and Clare provided for community decisions to be taken together. It is also in keeping with present Anglican structures. Synodical government is not perfect, and there is no reason to think that the present ways of electing members of synod (or members of parliament for that matter) produce people who represent perfectly their electorate, but it is an attempt to face openly the issues that divide us. At its best it represents an attempt to listen to all sides of a question, and to find ways of living together in charity. The names of brother and sister, applied in new ways and so widely by Francis and Clare, represent an outlook which is in keeping with this way of valuing persons and taking seriously all other creatures. Our idea of enclosure does not exclude concern for the rest of the world: Bartoli's phrase 'enclosed and open to the world'⁹ fits very well.

The Order is said to have three characteristics: humility, love and joy. As I look back, I see that I have written of love in various ways, but I have not mentioned humility. It has been defined as truth, however, and I have referred to the search for truth. It seems the safest way of approach. No one wants to be like the child who ended the description of herself by saying, 'And I pride myself on my humility'.

To return to the original question, I have never found any difficulty in being Anglican and Franciscan. The vision that seized my attention was a vision of God, of Christ, of the world as God-given, and of an all-embracing community. All this was seen in an atmosphere of joy and thanksgiving. This vision communicated itself to me where I was, in the Church of England, and there was enough in it to occupy me for a lifetime. It has been a joy to meet Poor Clares in this country and on the continent, and also some of the Franciscan brothers on the continent, with whom I could share this vision and respond to it and who readily recognize me as sharing their approach. To read Bonaventure or Boff on the Trinity is to feel profoundly at home. Ecclesiastical allegiance has not been for me relevant to this: it has been important to reflect a quality

of life, but I have seen this as possible in any Christian setting. So I continue to concern myself with the gospel as I have heard it, and to feel close to Clare and to Francis in this concern.

NOTES

¹ Luc Mathieu OFM, 'La générosité de Dieu' in *Évangile aujourd'hui*, No 157 (Paris, 1993), pp 4–10.

² *Concise Oxford dictionary* (Oxford, 1990), p 1105.

³ M. Bartoli, *Clare of Assisi* (London, 1993), p 53.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp 62–64.

⁵ In *Community* (June 1993), the magazine of the National Association of Christian Centres and Networks.

⁶ E. Leclerc, *Francis of Assisi: return to the gospel* (Chicago, 1983), p 82, quoting Fr Lippert.

⁷ David Jenkins and Rebecca Jenkins, *Free to believe* (London, 1991).

⁸ Unpublished thesis by Rosemary Sharpe.

⁹ Bartoli, p 76.