

FRANCIS AND CLARE

A Praxis of Solidarity for the Contemporary World

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IN REWRITING THE LIFE OF Francis of Assisi over twenty years after his death, Thomas of Celano adds a significant detail to the story of the Poverello's conversion. It seems that one day, while walking in Assisi, Francis saw and was repelled by a deformed, hunchbacked woman. Later in the day, during the night, the devil appeared to him in a dream and informed him that if he persisted in his desire to serve God, he would become just like this social outcast. Francis, however, did persist. Soon thereafter, Celano notes, the young merchant began to do penance among the lepers.¹ The story is very similar to that narrated in the *Legend of Clare* (c. 1255–1260) about how the devil also threatened her with physical deformity if she persisted in the life of penance:

Once in the depth of night, while she was sleeping, an angel of darkness stood by her in the form of a black child and warned her, saying: 'You should not cry so much because you will become blind'. But when she replied immediately: 'Whoever sees God will not be blind', he departed confused. That same night, after Matins, while Clare was praying, bathed as usual in a stream [of tears], the deceitful admonisher approached. 'You should not cry so much', he said, 'otherwise your brain will dissolve and flow through your nose because you will have a crooked nose.' To which she responded quickly: 'Whoever knows the Lord suffers nothing that is twisted'. Immediately he fled and vanished.²

These two temptations come to Francis and Clare in the form of frightening, even threatening images of women: deformed, twisted, socially outcast, physically victimized. Should they persist in penance, an endeavour which arouses their most basic fears, they will become like these images, leper-like members of a community of the marginalized. Penance is here conceived as taking on the body of a woman.

The visions of Francis and Clare speak in a timely manner in the context of movements in contemporary culture which are reassessing the relationships, function and role of women and men in Church and society. Symbolically, the debates focus on the body of the woman, traditionally the carrier of society's identity. Issues such as equal rights,

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political power, abortion, divorce, the formation of public policy, economic access, physical abuse and pornography are but symptoms of the 'crisis in human relationships' affecting most developed countries. Taking a position on these issues means not simply articulating one's views of the role of women in society, but also stating something about the identity of men in relationship to women and, within that exchange, human community itself.

For Roman Catholics, the depth and breadth of this current social and political upheaval has been recognized in a variety of issues on the local, national and international levels. Arguments over team ministry, the definition of the priesthood, equality in decision-making power and mutuality in work are the daily bread of congregations and ministers in England, Ireland, Canada and the United States. The papal encyclical *Mulieris dignitatem* (1988) and the prolonged process surrounding the United States hierarchy's aborted pastoral on women's concerns are but two examples of the fermentation now occurring.³ In many ways, we have, like Francis and Clare, embarked on a collective journey of penance with its frightening visage of an unrecognizable and margined social configuration.

Working within the context of these contemporary movements, historians of Franciscan origins have only recently begun to ask the question: Does the *relationship* between Francis and Clare indicate to us any new meanings and threads in their gospel way of life? Can we discover any insights through their experience which can guide us in our own contemporary journey? Can we uncover here some basic elements of a spirituality of relationships? Such questions are new, and the perspectives which have only begun to emerge on Franciscan sources are in this area very tentative; they remain to be refined by further scholarship, and that always with the qualification that life in the Middle Ages, especially in its view of gender, sexual passion, and the roles of men and women, remains hidden from the experience and understanding of those of us living in an industrialized, capitalistic and post-Christian society.⁴

To continue this line of development, in what follows I would like to describe some elements of a *praxis of solidarity* for our contemporary experience by selecting two characteristics which seem to me to be significant dimensions of the relationship between Francis and Clare. Although hardly exhaustive, they might provide some starting points for developing the Franciscan charism within the questions posed by our own cultures.

A praxis of penance

In their own time, Francis and Clare had good reason to fear the image of the deformed woman; and equally good reason to try, through penance, to embrace her. Their social and ecclesiastical culture mediated to them a dual picture. On the one hand, the scientific and folk traditions associated women with *body, lust, weakness, irrationality*, and men with *spirit, reason, strength*.⁵ In popular culture the body of the woman – and the social and ecclesiastical project associated with her emancipation – symbolized the same qualities associated with the leper: unbridled sensuality, covetousness, sin. In hagiography, the female sin was sexual, arising from within her own body; the man was tempted from the outside, by the woman. Patristic exegesis identified Eve with the appetites and humanity, Adam with the intellect and divinity. Certainly, from this perspective, any encounter with a woman held within it the possibility of disaster, death, dehumanization and public humiliation. It could only be accompanied by feelings of anger, fear, hatred, disdain and aversion.

Yet, on the other hand, medieval biologists believed that a mother's blood fed the child in the womb; transmuted into breast milk, it fed the child who entered the world. Female blood, therefore, supported human life, and Christ bleeding on the cross became the symbol of the nurturing mother. Only through a woman did the word become flesh. In addition, the body of Christ, the *ecclesia*, was a woman representing the mercy which flowed from Christ's own side. In the highly symbolical world of the Middle Ages, the body of the woman, from this second perspective, represented life, hope, endurance, fruitfulness, Christ himself.

The lines of this dual cultural inheritance, with all of its ambiguity, cut through the hearts of both Francis and Clare. When Francis is challenged by Clare and embraces her as his own sister on a level with the brothers, as he indicates in the Form of Life he writes for her, he is embracing social and ecclesiastical ambiguity in its most concrete form. It is as great a challenge to him as the embrace of the leper: Will his association with the sisters lead others to classify him as heretical? Will the example of his relationship to Clare cause scandal? Will his acceptance of the woman lead to spiritual death? And on her side, her willingness to follow the poor Francis in obedience places her, a woman of noble lineage, in a position of social and ecclesiastical powerlessness and shame.⁶ For both of them, maintaining the relationship will become a way of life filled with fear and love, limitation and possibility. They experience the mutual relationship as existing on the borderland of

penance, yet to avoid the challenge is to abort the movement of the Spirit. In some sense, only through his relationship to Clare is Francis able to discover the fullness of Christ, both divine and human, who took flesh of the Virgin Mary. It is startling that in his writings he parallels the identity of Clare with that of the Virgin Mother. Francis writes for Clare a Form of Life modelled on the Annunciation story of Luke 1:26–34:

Since by divine inspiration you have made yourselves daughters and servants of the most high King, the heavenly Father, and have taken the Holy Spirit as your spouse, choosing to live according to the perfection of the holy Gospel, I resolve and promise for myself and for my brothers always to have the same loving care and special solicitude for you as [I have] for them.⁷

He uses the same terminology in reference to the Virgin Mary in his daily recitation of the Office of the Passion:

Holy Virgin Mary,
among women,
there is no one like you born into the world:
you are the daughter
and the servant of the most high and supreme King
and Father of heaven,
you are the mother of our most holy Lord Jesus Christ,
you are the spouse of the Holy Spirit.⁸

It is equally startling, in a reverse sense, that Clare in her Testament continually parallels 'father' Francis with the 'Father of Mercies' (vs 7):

After the most high heavenly Father saw fit in His mercy and grace to enlighten my heart to do penance according to the example and teaching of our most blessed Father Francis, shortly after his own conversion, I, together with the few sisters whom the Lord had given me soon after my conversion, voluntarily promised him obedience, since the Lord had given us the light of His grace through his holy life and teaching.

There is in their experience, then, a sense that only in the mutual exchange and interchange between them can the fullness of the gospel life, the revelation of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be revealed.

To make the fullness of this gospel evident, penance must be embraced as a continual component of the relationship between sisters and brothers; it is the 'glue' of their solidarity. The 'Ashes sermon' which

Francis preaches to Clare provides the best example. As background, we can remember that Francis 'resolved and promised' in the Form of Life to have the same 'loving care and special solicitude' for Clare that he had for the brothers. Yet, less than ten years after this noble vow, the following occurs:

Repeatedly asked by his vicar to preach the word of God to his daughters when he stopped off for a short time at St Damian's, Francis was finally overcome by his insistence and consented. But when the nuns had come together, according to their custom, to hear the word of God, though no less to see their father, Francis raised his eyes to heaven, where his heart always was, and began to pray to Christ. He then commanded ashes to be brought to him and he made a circle with them around himself on the pavement and sprinkled the rest of them on his head. But when they waited for him to begin and the blessed father remained standing in the circle in silence, no small astonishment arose in their hearts. The saint then suddenly rose and to the amazement of the nuns recited the *Miserere mei Deus* in place of a sermon. When he had finished, he quickly left. The servants of God were so filled with contrition because of the power of this symbolic sermon that their tears flowed in abundance and they could scarcely restrain their hands from inflicting punishment on themselves.⁹

Obviously, Clare and the sisters are moved to do penance in this story and so is Francis. Why? Could it be that for Francis, he had hedged on his initial commitment? For Clare and the sisters, that they had begun to doubt the initial promise? Solidarity, which sees in the other the image of God and the vehicle of revelation and redemption, had become too great a penance: *Miserere mei Deus*. In a very real sense, that most perceptive twentieth-century commentator on the reality of exchange between people, Charles Williams, summarizes what is happening here:

The Communion of Saints involves the resurrection of all the past, and therefore the forgiveness of sins. The resurrection involves forgiveness and communion. But the forgiveness is the necessity of all. Where love is fate, this is fate.¹⁰

The discipline of seeing, believing and obeying

Culture produces both liability and possibility. We have seen this operative in the image of the woman mediated to Francis and Clare. In order to discover a second component of a praxis of solidarity, I would like to examine Francis' experience of Clare from the viewpoint of the insight which she gave to his faith and the disciplines which that required.

A glimpse of Clare's first impact on Francis can be found in the witness of her younger sister in 1253. Beatrice, who had entered San Damiano in 1229, testifies at the canonization proceedings for Clare that when Francis heard of the fame of Clare's holiness, he 'went many times to preach to her, so that the virgin Clare acquiesced to his preaching, renounced the world and all earthly things, and went to serve God as soon as she was able'.¹¹ It is now well established that Clare led a remarkable life of holiness in her own home long before she heard Francis preach. She was probably a penitential recluse: refusing marriage, giving alms to the poor, fasting, wearing a penitential garment, praying.¹² Francis apparently articulated the faith already present in her heart and she 'made herself' a daughter and servant of the Most High King. Her determination impressed him deeply, as she notes in her Testament (27-28):

When the blessed Francis saw, however, that, although we were physically weak and frail, we did not shirk deprivation, poverty, hard work, trial, or the shame or contempt of the world – rather, we considered them as great delights, as he had frequently examined us according to the example of the saints and his brothers – he greatly rejoiced in the Lord.

Francis here is engaged in a process of discernment or testing. At the same time, he is open to Clare's example, is genuinely edified, and ultimately her witness arouses in him the presence of the Holy Spirit: he 'greatly rejoiced in the Lord' much as Elizabeth reacted to Mary's visit (Luke 1:39-45). Through the woman the womb has become fecund and John (Francis' name at baptism) can now enter into the drama of salvation. Once again, he makes the choice to obey the Spirit who has led him to this place.

It is customary to describe Francis' impact on Clare as one of teaching, guiding and supporting, but Clare's impact on Francis is equally profound. It is related to the quality of *seeing, believing and obeying* which allows her entry into his soul. His ecclesiastical culture would have given him natural blinkers. The local church was wary of many of the women's movements in the valleys surrounding Assisi. Valdesian women met in small conventicles, claimed to celebrate eucharist and forgive sins, and preached. In addition, the heresy of Catharism, also present in Umbria, took a very dim view of the role of the woman in the economy of salvation. Yet Francis *saw* something in Clare, he *believed*, and *obeyed* – taking her into his fraternity – and that allowed her to become Mary to his Elizabeth.

Solidarity occurs when people see and believe, that is, when they link the action of God with unexpected places, put grace together with a sinful world, see Spirit in the midst of matter, and then begin to live with the consequences. Clare's light – her obvious example, her hard work, poverty, deprivation, and willingness to bear shame – clarifies Francis' gospel project and gives to his faith an explosively inclusive edge. He states in his Testament that the Lord gave him faith in churches, 'pitiful priests of this world', the eucharist, written words, and, after that, 'brothers'. Each of these 'insights' forced on him a particular project with the society and Church of his day: the preaching of reform, allegiance to the papacy, reverence for clerics, defence of the eucharistic crusade of Lateran Council IV, the formation of a fraternity of equals. In parallel fashion, Francis' experience of Clare opens up in his heart a further dimension of God's presence in the world. He must now welcome sisters on an equal basis into his new vision of community. Clare gives depth to his sacramental belief. Ultimately, through her example and teaching, she, who is popularly defined as 'inferior' and 'frail', the bearer of all of matter's limitations, yet in whom he has discovered the Spirit, becomes the human instrument which teaches him the necessity of practising solidarity with everything created that bears the mark of the Spirit: errant brothers, a sinful Church, the Moslem unbeliever, a scrap of matter, the water and wine on the altar, his own frail body, the tiny baby in the crib at Greccio, and the broken man on the cross. Only through the personal discipline of seeing, believing and obeying can the gospel come alive in the world. It is the same way with her, and both of them must struggle to keep this discipline of the 'Word become flesh' alive in the world.

Conclusion

We live in a society marked by a 'crisis in human relationships' of significant historical proportions. The difficulties associated with family life, ministry in the Church, and the respective roles of men and women in society are well known. To some extent, since the older identities and patterns of relationships associated with clearer and more definite social boundaries have passed away, we are once again challenged to search the world and rediscover the presence of God in the space between people. It seems to this historian and contemporary Church member that, despite the differences separating their world from ours, a similar project of personal and social reconstruction confronted Francis and Clare of Assisi. It was, as they and now we have discovered, at the heart of our evangelical vocation.

The response of Francis and Clare was to create a new pattern of relationships between people which appealed to married couples, singles, children, men and women of all persuasions. At the heart of this new pattern lay a spirituality marked by a *praxis of solidarity*. It was at the same time a call to continual penance and an openness to see, believe and obey the Spirit who, they discovered, could work in every dimension of human existence and who was particularly alive in the exchange which occurred between people held together through the 'bond of perfection', the Holy Spirit. Here there is a great deal more to be pondered if we today are to rediscover in our own times the way the Word becomes flesh.

NOTES

¹ Thomas of Celano, *The second life of St Francis* in Marion A. Habig (ed), *St Francis of Assisi, writings and early biographies, English omnibus of the sources for the life of St Francis* (Chicago, 1973), p 369 (2 Celano 9).

² *The legend of Saint Clare*, 19, in Regis J. Armstrong OFM Cap (ed), *Clare of Assisi, early documents* (New Jersey, 1988), p 209. For Clare, crying was symbolic of penance and love. Clare often cried out of compassion for her sisters and love for the eucharist. See The Process of Canonization (3.7) in *Early documents*, p 140.

³ John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem* (Vatican City, 1988); The Ad Hoc Committee for a Pastoral Response to Women's Concerns, 'One in Christ Jesus', *Origins* 22 (31 December 1992), and 'Document on women's concerns debated', *Origins* 22 (3 December 1992).

⁴ A few significant titles in this area would be Pierre Brunette OFM, 'Francis and Clare of Assisi: a journey into symbols of growth', *Studia Mystica* vol 12, no 1 (Spring 1989), pp 6–20; Margaret Carney OSF, 'Francis and Clare: a critical examination of the sources', *Laurentianum* vol 30, nos 1–2 (1989), pp 25–60; Jean-Francois Godet, 'Clare the woman, as seen in her writings', *Greyfriars Review* vol 4, no 3 (1990), pp 7–30.

⁵ For what follows, compare Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and redemption, essays on gender and the human body in medieval religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), chs 5 and 6.

⁶ Great light has been shed on these social consequences by Marco Bartoli, *Clare of Assisi* (London, 1993) and Raoul Manselli, *St Francis of Assisi* (Chicago, 1988).

⁷ Regis J. Armstrong OFM Cap (ed), *Francis and Clare, the complete works* (New York, 1982), pp 44–45.

⁸ Armstrong, *Francis and Clare*, p 82. For background see C. A. Lainati OSC, 'Una "lectura" de Clara de Asis a través de las fuentes', *Selecciones de franciscanismo* vol 9 (1980), pp 199–217; Optato Van Asseldonk, *Maria, Francesco e Chiara* (Rome, 1989).

⁹ 2 Celano 207 in *Omnibus of sources*, p 527. For commentary on this event see Raoul Manselli, 'Gesture as sermon in St Francis of Assisi', *Greyfriars Review* vol 6, no 1 (1992), pp 37–48.

¹⁰ Charles Williams, *The forgiveness of sins* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1942), p 108.

¹¹ Regis J. Armstrong OFM Cap (ed), *Clare of Assisi, early documents*, p 164 (Process of Canonization 12.2).

¹² Compare, for example, Bertulf van Leeuwen OFM, 'Clare, abbess of penitents', *Greyfriars Review* vol 4, no 2 (1990), pp 73–81.