

# A GLOBE OF MIRRORS

By FRANCES TERESA DOWNING

*The Lord has called us to this greatness: that those who are to be effective mirrors and examples for others, should see themselves mirrored in us . . . Therefore, if we have lived according to this form of life which I have already spoken about, we shall leave a noble example to others.<sup>1</sup>*

WITH THESE EXTRAORDINARY WORDS, Clare sets before her sisters, present and to come, a clear statement of the apostolic focus of her form of life. She also indicates her personal position with regard to her community and that community's position with regard to the wider Church. The words are an extended application of another assertion of hers: 'The Son of God was made the Way for us, and our most blessed father Francis, a true lover and imitator of that Way, showed and taught it to us by his word and his example'.<sup>2</sup> We, she is saying to us, can look to her, just as she looked to Francis and Francis to Christ and Christ to the Father. Others in their turn will then look to us, and so the brilliant glory of God will be reflected from the mirror of eternity into our sublunary world.<sup>3</sup> So, says St Paul from whom she learnt this optimism, we all grow brighter and brighter as we are turned into the image we reflect (2 Cor 3:18).

Clare's perception of a gospel community developed from pondering on the unique nature of our individual call from God, and our consequent shouldering of full responsibility as heirs to the Kingdom. It was rooted in a call to follow the total kenosis, or self-emptying, of Christ by means of the most radical poverty possible. This interchange of all and nothing was the 'great and praiseworthy piece of commerce'<sup>4</sup> she speaks about to Agnes of Prague. On a still deeper level, a community in which all live as daughters of the one Source is called to show forth here on earth the mutuality of the Trinitarian community. This is a challenge to greatness which might well cause us some concern.

In 1219 a Rule, known as the Constitutions of Cardinal Hugolino, had been imposed on Clare. This had been written for the many amorphous groups of women religious put under Hugolino's care by Honorius III, and in theory it remained in force until 1247 when it was replaced, with all mention of the Rule of St Benedict removed, by the Rule of Innocent IV. By then Clare had decided to write her own Rule,

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to capture on paper the vision she had shared with Francis and which had begun to be realized in her communities.

Hugolino's idea was that all the women religious entrusted to him were, in some sense, his daughters to be kept in virginal uncontamination awaiting the Bridegroom, much as a strict father of the period would protect his daughters until marriage. He seems to have thought that the more constricted life was here below, the more attractive the life above would appear, which is probably true to some extent. The tone of his Rule can be seen from its opening words:

Every true Religion and approved institute of life endures by certain rules and requirements and by certain disciplinary laws. Unless each sister has diligently striven to observe a certain correct rule and discipline for living, she will deviate from righteousness to the degree that she does not observe the guidelines of righteousness . . . Therefore, beloved daughters in Christ, because you have chosen under the inspiration of divine grace, to travel the hard and narrow path that leads to life . . .<sup>5</sup>

After this, he goes on to talk about enclosure, death and austerity . . . Francis and Clare had dreamed of something entirely different which, in 1212 or 1213, Francis had defined in a letter known as the Form of Life. At that time, numbers were few; even five years later there were only six sisters, within ten years only eight – or eight known to us, but to this little group living in great poverty at San Damiano, Francis wrote quite differently from Hugolino. Francis said:

Because through divine inspiration you have made yourselves daughters and servants of the Most High, the King, the heavenly Father, and because you have betrothed yourselves to the Holy Spirit by choosing to live according to the perfection of the holy Gospel, I wish and I promise, for my own part and on behalf of my brothers, always to have for you, as for them, the same most loving care and special concern.<sup>6</sup>

In reality of course, there is no pleasing us and we find this high spiritual living as far beyond us as the hard and physically punitive way of Hugolino. Here we are daunted by the active quality of Francis' verbs, and a vision which seems exalted beyond ordinary flesh and blood. Who dares claim to be living the perfection of the gospel? Clare, however, fully realized that this vision, like all others, has to be incarnated in ordinary life by ordinary people. While never losing sight of the perfection of the gospel, she rescues us by the wisdom of her old age, with some gentle guidelines that make it all seem possible. Traditionally,

her Rule is considered to be a faithful reflection of what actually happened at San Damiano, following the usual Franciscan approach of acting first and thinking later. It is also a balance, if not a compromise, between idealism and reality. She learnt as she went along, which is probably why the Rule has worked so well for over seven hundred years and still does so today.

Like many initiators, Clare might have said that the way they had lived in the very early days was the nearest to the dream. In her case this would mean before the watershed of 1215 when (for whatever reason) Francis 'almost forced' her to accept the title and office of abbess.<sup>7</sup> That original pre-1215 group comprised her sister Agnes, her mother's pilgrimage companion Pacifica, Benvenuta of Perugia who had met the child Clare in exile, and Cecilia, another childhood friend. This comfortable familiarity enabled a degree of horizontal harmony which may never have been so easy again, even though those first three years must have seen great physical hardship, especially for the sheltered aristocratic women they all were at that stage. Francis, who was joined by numerous sprigs of nobility at a time when he still thought that if it tasted nasty it must be good for you, was insistent that they should work hard, and there is a suggestion in Clare's Testament that even she had to prove herself to Francis:

Seeing that although we were physically frail and weak, we were not refusing any neediness, poverty, work, trouble or scorn and contempt from the world, the blessed Francis much rejoiced in the Lord that we considered them rather as great delights. We had often studied how to do this in the example of the saints and of our brothers.<sup>8</sup>

By 1238, however, there were fifty sisters in that little house from various backgrounds and social classes. Other communities were wanting to follow Clare and asking for an abbess from her community, and ordinary foundations were also being made, sometimes two a year, so there was a continual coming and going of people. There is a document from 1238 concerning the sale of some land which has the signatures of the entire community on it. It is an important document to us because it indicates that, even though officially sailing under Benedict and Hugolino's flags, Clare practised what she taught, and that major as well as minor decisions at San Damiano were reached by way of consultation involving all the sisters.

It was and is a basic Franciscan conviction that the Spirit speaks to the whole group. Consequently it is of prime importance that the group meet in order to listen to the Spirit. Being a realist, Clare established

what she considered an irreducible minimum of meetings if the community were to listen, be consulted and keep abreast of developments and issues. Once in the week, at least, the abbess must call her sisters to Chapter.<sup>9</sup> It is not at all the same for the abbess to speak to each one separately. The process of listening together to the Spirit, of listening to each other and hearing points of view which we had not thought of ourselves, is an important part of growth towards a mature and shared decision. To do this properly, channels must be cleared, and so she as well as the sisters must confess their common and public offences and negligences.

This is how it ought to be, says Clare later in the Rule, that the abbess be the personal servant (*ancilla*) of all the sisters.<sup>10</sup> In that role she apologizes first. Both Clare and Francis took deeply to heart Christ's example of washing the feet of his disciples and telling them that this was an example for them to copy. They both saw this act of washing another's feet as the fundamental attitude of Christian leadership, and this is one way in which Clare put it into practice, though it is worth mentioning that she also literally washed her sisters' feet when they returned from being out on business. When everything has been cleared away which might impede the sisters' listening to the Spirit, they proceed to business: 'And there she shall confer with all her sisters about any matters which, for the service and well-being of the monastery, are to be dealt with'.

Listening together to the Spirit is a shared search for consensus. Probably Clare would not have acted on a vote of one more than half but would have waited, as we try to do today, until a more common mind had emerged. One vote did not make a majority, in her thinking.<sup>11</sup> She, who had grown up among the *maiores*, the thirteen families of Assisi, descendants of Charlemagne, relatives of Frederick II, knew all about the 'might is right' approach and wanted none of it. The inspiration of her thinking was not political but incarnational. Salvation and redemption are worked out by ordinary people disagreeing in the ordinary way. The coming of the Kingdom, as the gospel makes quite clear, is not heralded by total unanimity but by contradiction among those of the same household. It is the presence or absence of a commitment to keep struggling with mutual love and acceptance – no matter what 'they' are like – which makes the contradiction redemptive or destructive. Here as everywhere, Clare looked into Christ's life for guidance and enlightenment, and never lost sight of the emptying undergone by the Word in becoming flesh. She knew well that the truth of God is far from worldly greatness, and so she adds: 'Often the Lord reveals what is better to the

one who is lesser'. This is a slightly changed quotation from Benedict who says that the Lord often reveals what is best to the younger, *iuniori*.<sup>12</sup> Here Clare substitutes the word so loved by Francis but not used by her anywhere else: *minori* – to the lesser, which could be any of us, and will, over the years, be each of us.

We see the importance of consensus appearing again in her arrangements for anyone wishing to join the community: 'If any woman comes to us through divine inspiration, wanting to accept this life, the Abbess is bound to seek the consent of all the sisters and if the majority consent, she may receive her'.<sup>13</sup> Total agreement is the goal though a majority agreement is more likely to be the reality. Would one have argued with Clare? It seems so, for the story is told that Francis came to her one day with five young women wanting to join her and Clare said she would take four of them. Cecilia, one of the very first companions, is the source for this story.<sup>14</sup> Clare's point was that the woman would not stay, but she was put under 'great pressure' to receive her, though we do not know by whom. Perhaps it was Francis, though the sources do not, on this occasion, say so, or perhaps it was a majority vote of the community. In the event, the woman left after six months. How comforting for those of us who agonize over the discernment of vocations today!

Because the onus of perception is often placed on the community, the abbess's role is quite different from any arrangement which preceded Clare. In Hugolino's communities, the abbess was 'to be vigilant', 'to be notified', 'to judge'; she 'may never permit', 'must be aware', and if she does not 'should be punished appropriately as is proper'.<sup>15</sup> Clare seems to move in another universe of reference altogether, in which the abbess's task is not so much to be the mouthpiece of the Spirit as to be a hearer of the Word. She should so listen to her sisters that at the end she can say: This is what the Spirit is saying to the Church in this community. She, like her sisters, functions within a context of *minoritas*, lessness and service. Because the service of the community must go on, whatever the circumstances, Clare and Francis introduced the concept of a vicar or vicaress. This elective task is not quite parallel with that of the Benedictine prioress chosen by the abbess. In Clare's vision, the abbess and vicaress express, by their conformity to the common life and their own union of mind and heart, the intent and unity within the group.

What this attitude of service meant in practice was a total abandonment of any kind of class distinction between the sisters, whether of the social class to which they had belonged before they entered or of distinctions within the community. The only one which seems to have

remained is that between those who could read Latin and those who could not; here Clare follows Francis and says that those who are ignorant of letters should not trouble themselves to learn.<sup>16</sup> It was quite customary at that time for ladies to enter with their servants, just as it was normal to have a praying class and a working class within the monastery. Clare had nothing of this. There were sisters who served outside the monastery<sup>17</sup> and went out on business, but on their return they simply rejoined the community. This category of sisters was, in fact, suppressed in 1336 by Benedict XII because of the enclosure laws then in force, which raises interesting questions about Clare's actual practice of enclosure. This is too big and too controversial an issue to treat adequately here, but it is worth mentioning that Clare avoided that 'flight from the world' attitude which has too often coloured the enclosure.

Within the community, all the sisters were equal, all living in the same way, all living together. This included the abbess and vicaress, which seems obvious now but was unusual then. 'Her vicaress shall do likewise', is a constant refrain throughout the Rule.

The abbess shall uphold the common life in everything, but especially in the choir, dormitory, refectory, infirmary and with regard to clothing. Her vicaress must uphold those things in the same way.<sup>18</sup>

These arrangements about speaking [at the grille etc.] must be observed by the abbess and her vicaress.<sup>19</sup>

There is no question for Clare of the vicaress being a political counterweight to the abbess, a balance to her reforming zeal or her conservative caution, although it is always a temptation for a community to elect a vicaress with this partly in mind. Clare looks for harmony of outlook and always assumes complete loyalty from her vicaress and councillors.

. . . decisions about this shall be made in prudence by the abbess or her vicaress.<sup>20</sup>

All these things are to be shared out by the abbess or her vicaress with the advice of the discreets (council) for the common good.<sup>21</sup>

To some extent it is true that the essence of a community finds its incarnation in the abbess. When they elect her, says Clare, they are to think only of the common good. She is to be one of the group, professing the same values and ideals, again following out her theme of Christ

becoming one of us and offering leadership to us out of this prior identification:

No one is to be elected unless she be professed. And if someone who is not professed be elected, or otherwise given them, she is not to be obeyed unless she first professes the form of our poverty.<sup>22</sup>

There is an interesting and significant detail worth noticing here, which is that Clare makes no provision for the abbess to be confirmed in office by any official of the Church, in contrast to previous Rules. If the new abbess has been validly elected by the majority of the sisters, then that is enough: election is effected by the sisters' vote. This small point indicates again that Clare's trust in her community's ability to take responsibility was not lip service, falling apart when important issues came along. Indeed, once the abbess is elected, the sisters still do not abdicate responsibility for gospel living and cannot shrug off the blame of failure onto the abbess. If she is no good, Clare says robustly, she should be changed. It is not everybody's charism:

And if, at any time, it seems to all the sisters that the said abbess is not equal to their service and common well-being, the sisters already mentioned must elect themselves another as abbess and mother in the way already given above.<sup>23</sup>

To be abbess was, and is, to inherit the Christ-like task of washing the feet of the sisters. Before his death Francis said the same thing in another and more forceful way when he gave a description of his ideal minister as one who 'should make himself available to be stormed by all!'<sup>24</sup> Being stormed by all, 'the abbess should have such [an air of] familiarity about her that they can speak and act to her as ladies do to their servants'.<sup>25</sup> However (one of Clare's favourite words), the abbess is a mirror to the sisters in order that they too reflect this ideal.

She should study to go before [the sisters] because of her goodness and holy conduct rather than because of her office, so that she may move them to love and obey her by her example, not by fear.<sup>26</sup>

So the demands we tend cheerfully to make of the abbess are in fact to be realized in the lives of each Poor Clare – and then, because the sisters are only mirrors of far greater things, in the lives of all those who are called in Christ to live the gospel. The abbess is a focus, articulating the sisters' deepest desires which are put into effect by the community. In this way

she expresses her personal call to be the servant of the community and imitates Christ who expressed in human language the inner desires of the Godhead.

I have devoted so much space to Clare's ideas about the abbess because here, in the interplay of abbess and community, we see most clearly that while she dealt in the community values of authority and responsibility, she never dealt in power. Her stay with the nuns at San Paolo must have been an unforgettable lesson in this matter. That monastery had had immense privileges of sanctuary, which were partly why Francis had taken her there on the night she fled from home. However, when her angry family had arrived to force her back, she had been left to defend herself. The abbess and the community had done nothing either to protect her or their own privileges, even though they had a standing army kept specifically for the purpose of enforcing the Church's peace! This must have given Clare, who was a highly intelligent woman, to ponder deeply on the interplay of power and privilege and on the way they almost inevitably lead us into compromise with other powers. This was typified by the way in which the nuns, declining to tangle with her powerful family and neglecting in the process their proper responsibilities for the vulnerable, effectively entered into an alliance, however unspoken, with the values of power and violence.

When we read Clare's Rule today, we need to remember that it was not written until the very end of her life and therefore contains all that she had learned from her own experience and the brothers' experience (which was on the whole more painful). She says many things which awake sympathetic echoes today, not least about the degree of personal autonomy she requires from her sisters, the amount of consultation she suggests and the degree of moral responsibility she assumes. Her standard of friendly living-together is high but, with the grace of God, not impossible. A loving and observant Poor Clare community is probably one of the happier places on earth, and this would have pleased Clare.

She never lost sight of the perspective indicated in the quotation from her Testament at the beginning of this article,<sup>27</sup> recognizing that her community was wider than the sisters at San Damiano. She longed to return God's total love of us with the interest of an increase of talents, as she called it. She understood her vocation in the light of her understanding of the incarnation of the Word and she wrote her Rule to help the sisters live the gospel in all its fullness. In the very first sentence, she says:



The form of life of the Order of Poor Sisters, which blessed Francis began, is this: to keep the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, living in obedience, without ownership and in chastity.

This is the sum and substance of the whole thing; all the rest is commentary.

Out of such reflections, mingled with a lifetime's prayer, with all she had learnt from Francis and the grace given her to initiate this way of life, she developed a praxis of authority which was new. In it, we not only find her ideals but also the distilled wisdom of her experience, her holiness and tolerance, her compassion and, above all, her challenge. This vision is as valid today as it ever was. A community of poor sisters, living a life of great simplicity and fidelity to Christ, is set within the wider gospel community like a globe of mirrors, hanging in the halls of God. From this globe the glory of God reflects in pools of rainbow light around the Church so 'that those who are to be effective mirrors and examples for others, should see themselves mirrored in us'.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Testament of Clare 21, 23.

<sup>2</sup> Testament of Clare 5.

<sup>3</sup> Cf Letter 3:12,13.

<sup>4</sup> Letter 1:30.

<sup>5</sup> The Rule of Cardinal Hugolino. See Regis J. Armstrong OFM Cap (ed and trans), *Clare of Assisi: early documents* (Mahwah NJ, 1988), p 88. (Hereafter called: *Early documents*.)

<sup>6</sup> Rule of Clare 6:3.

<sup>7</sup> Acts of the Process of Canonization, Witness 1:6 (*Early documents*, p 130).

<sup>8</sup> Testament 27, 28.

<sup>9</sup> This and subsequent citations: Rule 4:15-18.

<sup>10</sup> Rule 10:5.

<sup>11</sup> 'One is a majority' – reputedly said by Disraeli among others.

<sup>12</sup> Rule of St Benedict 3:3.

<sup>13</sup> Rule 2:1,2.

<sup>14</sup> Canonization Process, Witness 6:15 (*Early documents* p 153).

<sup>15</sup> Rule of Hugolino, *Early documents*, pp 89-96.

<sup>16</sup> Rule 10:8.

<sup>17</sup> Rule 9:11.

<sup>18</sup> Rule 4:13,14.

<sup>19</sup> Rule 5:8.

<sup>20</sup> Rule 5:8,17.

<sup>21</sup> Rule 7:5.

<sup>22</sup> Rule 4:4,5.

<sup>23</sup> Rule 4:6,7.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas of Celano, *The second life of St Francis*, 185.

<sup>25</sup> Rule 10:4.

<sup>26</sup> Rule 4:8,9. Clare has Benedict in mind here, cf Rule of St Benedict, 64: 7-8.

<sup>27</sup> Until recently the absence of early manuscripts cast doubts on the authenticity of this Testament, but a fourteenth-century copy was found in Messina, Sicily (1954), a fifteenth-century copy was found at Urbino (1957) in the Poor Clare monastery there, another (1970) at Uppsala (which had belonged to St Bridget of Sweden, who went to Assisi in 1352), and one at Madrid (1974).