# '[GOD] WHOSE BEAUTY THE SUN AND THE MOON ADMIRE':[1]
## Clare and Ecology

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*I. Contemporary concern for the earth*

IN EVERY AGE THE HUMAN COMMUNITY has to deal with distinctive problems and crises. In the last quarter century, we have become increasingly alarmed at the growing threat to the ecosystem.[2] To find solutions, we employ a variety of resources – economic, educational, scientific, religious, literary, political, historical. Physicists articulate an awe-inspiring vision of the material universe and the interconnectedness of its parts – matter, energy, time. Chinese and Native American Indian cultures remind us of attitudes toward nature that have been allowed to atrophy in western culture. Feminists call for an end to relationships of domination, and a return to an appreciation and celebration of bodiliness and Mother Earth. Psychology views persons in their wholeness and in the context of the wider gestalt of history, geography and nature.

Also in every age, members of faith communities turn to the wellsprings of their particular religious traditions for ideas, behaviours, insights – anything that might provide a direction or be part of a solution to the crises at hand. For Christians, recovery of the tradition in the interest of ecological integrity involves particular ambiguity.

Authors Thomas Berry[3] and Lynn White[4] lay some of the blame for our exploitative stance toward creation at the door of Christian tradition. Gregory Baum suggests that part of this blame resides in church teaching, legislation and practice that gave expression to the 'sharp division between the Church as the fellowship of grace and the world as the place of God's absence'.[5] The anti-matter, anti-worldly aspects of so much Christian literature have contributed to our inability to value matter in appropriate ways. And Christian ecofeminists connect the idea of the domination of nature with social domination starting with the basic relation between men and women.[6] Aware of these ambiguities, we may find it worth while, nevertheless, to question

and plumb the tradition with our concerns for the ecosystem in mind. Are there strains that can offer assistance across the centuries?

In particular, are there aspects of the life and spirituality of Clare of Assisi that can instruct us as we struggle to be more aware of, and responsible to, our environment? One must admit that a *direct* connection between Clare and ecology is difficult to establish. In spite of the recent and welcome research on Clare that highlights her gifts as an innovator in religious life for women in the thirteenth century,[7] Francis dominates the terrain when it comes to a theology of creation. His *Canticle of Brother Sun* expresses a positive relationship with the natural world that is virtually unprecedented in the tradition before his time.[8] Unlike the biblical reference in Matthew to the lilies of the field, which emphasizes human value, Francis' references to nature hold up the value of nature itself. Certainly, it is Francis who has inspired lovers of nature down through the centuries, leading to John Paul II's naming Francis the patron of ecology in 1980.

Clare's awareness of nature was quite different from that of Francis. Clare was more interested in speaking about God and human persons than about nature. In fact, she explicitly excludes creation as a vessel able to contain the Creator in the way a human soul can (45). Clare also often juxtaposes God and the world, emphasizing their differences. For her, the world is fleeting and filled with temptation whereas God is eternal and the source of our ultimate security.

But it is possible and legitimate to see in Clare certain qualities and dispositions that can, by extension, help us to reverence the natural world of creation. I would like to build on the feminist insight that domination in social relationships is related to domineering attitudes toward nature, and suggest that learning new patterns of human relationships can enhance our ability to see ourselves as *part* of nature and to relate to the natural world in fresh and constructive ways. In particular, I examine the ways in which Clare related to those around her, and ask how we might appropriate her deferential ways of relating to others and extend them imaginatively to the cosmos.[9]

*II. Clare's relationships*

*A. The setting.* Thirteenth-century Umbria, the setting for the founding of the Franciscans, provided the socio-political setting for a change in understanding of social relationships. The landowners (*maiores*) and the common people (*minores*) were locked in a struggle that led to the formation of a *commune*, in which economic factors gained prominence over family line and feudal obligations.[10] And in her book, *The first*

*Franciscan woman*, Margaret Carney calls attention to the ways in which Francis and his companions developed similar patterns in their fraternal life. In contrast to the vertical, hierarchical patterns of medieval, feudal society ('power over'), the brothers emphasized the importance of horizontal relationships (humble 'being-with').[11] In the Earlier Rule we read, 'No one is to be called prior'. And in *The chronicles*, Jordan of Giano relates how early Franciscan superiors shared in menial household tasks and ruled as 'a mother her sons and a hen her chicks'.[12]

In significant ways, Clare was able to develop and maintain these new forms of relationship within the cloister more than the brothers, who soon became part of broader, ecclesial, hierarchical structures. As we examine the documents that give us clues to Clare's relationships, we should keep the following issues before us: What sense of self is revealed? How is this self-image reflected in dispositions and actions toward others? What qualities does Clare ascribe to the 'other'? What are the fruits of her attitude toward others?[13]

*B. Deference.* When I first read Clare's letters to Agnes of Prague years ago, I was struck by Clare's deference to her sister. The letters reflect respectful awe, humility and the delight that accompanies friendship. It is true that Agnes is from a noble family, the daughter of a king, and therefore worthy more than others to be addressed with deference. It is also true that many expressions in the letters reflect epistolary literary conventions of the day. In addition, Clare lived in a culture alive with the language and imagery of courtly love. But for all this, one can suppose that there was a substantive reality behind the conventional language. Language does not exist in a vacuum. While the twentieth century seems far removed from the social canons of medieval knights and their ladies, some elements of the courtly tradition might serve us well in our relationships with others and with nature.

Clare addresses Agnes:

> Saint Agnes
> To the esteemed and most holy virgin, Lady Agnes
> Most beloved sister
> Lady, worthy of great respect
> Most noble Queen
> To the daughter of the King of kings, the servant of the Lord of lords, the most worthy Spouse of Jesus Christ, and therefore, the most noble Queen, Lady Agnes
> To the lady [who is] most respected in Christ and the sister loved more than all [other] human beings
> To her who is half of her soul and the special shrine of her heart's deepest love, to the illustrious Queen and Bride of the Lamb, the eternal King

If we imagine the effects of such salutations in modern terms, we might discover a sense of being loved; an invitation to self-esteem because of being called to a noble vocation; a call to courage for renewed dedication; perhaps the desire to treat others in like manner. Such language lifts one's spirits, reminds one of the *imago Dei* within. Clare's attitude is the opposite of domination, manipulation, utilitarianism, one-upmanship, objectification.

*C. Model of humility.* Clare's respectful address to Agnes is thrown into bold relief when juxtaposed with Clare's statement of her own self-image. These phrases include: 'Clare, an unworthy servant of Jesus Christ and a *useless* servant of the enclosed Ladies of the Monastery of San Damiano, [Agnes'] subject and servant in all things, presents herself totally with a special reverence that she *attain the glory* of everlasting happiness'. And again, 'Clare *the useless* and unworthy servant of the Poor Ladies'; 'Clare, the most lowly and unworthy handmaid of Christ and servant of the Poor Ladies'. In the third letter, Clare says, 'And I sigh with so much more exultation in the Lord as I have known and believe that you supply most wonderfully what is lacking both in me and in the other sisters in following the footprints of the poor and humble Jesus Christ'. In the face of the lofty contemplation in which Agnes participates, Clare sees herself as 'your poor little mother'.

These words, properly understood, reveal a humble attitude toward self that flows out of an experience of strength and positive self-regard.[14] True humility develops in those who know and accept that they are made in God's image and that they are loved by God and by others. This knowledge and acceptance free one to respect and raise up the 'other' – whether the other be a person, or a tree or a paper wasp – as also made and loved by God. To the extent that we are able to be at home with, and rest easy in love, we are able in all simplicity to face other persons, the animal and plant kingdoms and even rocks and twigs with a humble, awe-filled respect. With such a mind-set, it becomes unthinkable to treat others or nature with a flippant disregard or with an attitude of arrogance, indifference, utilitarianism or disdain. One's sense of deep connection with God can open us to experience the connections with all of reality – and vice versa.

In her Rule and letters, Clare's favourite virtues appear again and again – poverty, charity and humility (48, 49, 58, 59, 70). Humility is also one of the virtues used by others to describe Clare (123, 140, 151).

At San Damiano Clare lived as humble servant to others. In The Acts of the Process of Canonization, the witnesses repeatedly testified to Clare's humility and to her concern for the sick whose mattresses she

washed. Perhaps the symbolic gesture most revelatory of her humble self-regard was foot washing. One time when Clare was washing the feet of one of the serving sisters, she turned to kiss her feet and when the sister pulled away, Clare was hit in the mouth with the sister's foot! Clare's response was to kiss the foot (140). While washing the feet of others is not a contemporary custom, it can serve as a symbol of humble reverence toward other people and things. One can speculate about possible modern ecological equivalents – growing one's own vegetables, contributing to clean-up efforts, caring for trees and shrubs, cleaning up beaches?

*D. Affectionate friendship.* Throughout her letters to Agnes, Clare names and celebrates Agnes' gifts and virtues, and is filled with joy because Agnes has become a diligent imitator of God. She wants Agnes to feel what God's friends feel as 'they taste the hidden sweetness that God has reserved for those who love'. But Agnes also seems to elicit from Clare a personal affection. Clare laments that she has not written more often, saying, 'Do not wonder or think that the fire of love for you glows with less delight in the heart of your mother'. Clare ends her final letter to Agnes with a powerful expression of their intimate friendship and the resultant joy that Clare feels.

> . . . I have inscribed the happy memory of you on the tablets of my heart, holding you dearer than all others. What more can I say? Let the tongue of the flesh be silent when I seek to express my love for you; and let the tongue of the Spirit speak, because the love that I have for you, O blessed daughter, can never be fully expressed by the tongue of the flesh, and even what I have written is an inadequate expression. (50)

At the least, Clare wants Agnes to receive her words as those of an 'affectionate mother', but the letters reveal an even deeper and more egalitarian regard and affection.

As we have seen above, Clare explicitly excludes creation from this specific kind of intimate connection with God. Only the soul of the faithful person – not the heavens nor the rest of creation – can be adequate containers of God. On the other hand, at Clare's canonization proceedings, Sister Angeluccia testified that Clare told them that they should 'praise God when they saw beautiful trees, flowers and bushes; and likewise, always to praise Him for and in all things when they saw all people and creatures' (160). Her focus on the eternal and the human did not prevent her from noticing and appreciating the beauties of God's creation.

In her Testament, Clare writes of personal remembrances, offering us a window onto the values she entrusts to the sisters to maintain after her

death. It is filled with praise and thanksgiving for God's gifts and mercies. It contains a succinct and powerful statement about how the sisters were to care for each other in love.

> And loving one another with the charity of Christ, may the love you have in your hearts be shown outwardly in your deeds so that, compelled by such an example, the sisters may always grow in love of God and in charity for one another (58).

*E. Equality among the Poor Ladies.* As Francis transcended the times in which he lived in his attitude toward animals and the natural world, Clare transcended the mores of religious life in the way she set up her own community. In her Form of Life Clare described her vision of religious community. This 'way' emphasizes horizontal rather than vertical relationships; concern for gentle, mutual care; power-sharing; compassion for sinners; special treatment for the ill; the Ladies' ability to live the rigours of religious life on a par with men.

Clare wanted a community that was as non-hierarchical in form as possible. Her models included sisterhood, maidservant/mistress and daughter/mother – 'relationships characterized by emotional closeness, mutual responsibility, and common needs'.[15] The 'democratic' nature of Clare's community signalled a significant departure from the norm of organization in religious communities of women in the thirteenth century. In Clare's community, most important decisions were taken by all the sisters or by a special group of consultors. All the Ladies, including the leaders, confessed their faults and sought forgiveness. The sisters had the power to elect and to remove superiors. And while Clare accepted the title 'Abbess' reluctantly and probably for political reasons, she never refers to herself in this way, but only to those who will succeed her (Rule 62, 66, 67, 73).

Life among the Poor Ladies was also filled with caring, deferential love. In *The legend of Saint Clare* we read of Clare's love not only for the souls, but also for the bodies of her sisters. Clare nursed, kept warm and encouraged her sisters with the utmost kindness and compassion (224). Reverential love was the guiding spirit of Clare's Order. Like Francis, Clare had reached a deep understanding of human dignity, and from this understanding was born her love and respect for the personality of each member of her community.

Clare advocated this kind of respectful and careful mutual concern between the sisters and brothers as well. In the midst of ecclesial monitoring and ambiguity toward the women on the part of the males in the Franciscan movement, Clare was adamant in adhering to the

Ladies' connection with Francis and the brothers. Till her death she clung to the words of the Form of Life received from Francis:

> Because by divine inspiration you have made yourselves daughters and servants to the Most High King . . . I resolve and promise for myself and for my brothers to always have that same loving care and solicitude for you as [I have] for them.

*III. Relationships in an ecological age*

What do these reflections on Clare's understanding of relationships contribute to a spirituality that has care for God's creation as an integral element? Unlike Christians in the thirteenth century, we have a new consciousness of the earth, its inhabitants and the ways in which it is threatened. In addition, we no longer embrace a Neoplatonic scepticism that disdains the goodness of matter and of the created universe. And yet we have much to learn from Clare's simple, deferential ways. She continues to teach us from her time and place in ways that can be beneficial to the quite different concerns of our time and place.

*A. Deference.* Clare invites us to nurture deferential ways towards others and by extension toward all of creation. As an exercise, one might reflect on experiences of deference. What persons do you know who stand out as being especially careful and respectful of others? When do you find *yourself* most deferential to others? And what has it felt like to be on the receiving end of someone's deference and care? Is it possible to begin to practise this kind of deference toward the universe?

One way to approach the meaning of deference is to think about the human gesture of 'bowing'. In her Testament, Clare herself makes this statement, '. . . on bended knee and bowing low with both [body and soul], I commend all my sisters . . .' (57). In its authentic forms, bowing symbolizes recognition of the beauty and dignity of human persons. Performers bow to their audiences, acknowledging their presence and their appreciation of the performers' service. Persons of oriental cultures bow routinely at introductions and leave-takings. And persons of many religious cultures bow at liturgical events. Clare's life might be described as a life of continual, reverential bowing to her God and to everyone in her world. In our time, we need to nurture our 'bowing skills' towards others and extend them to the entire creation.

We can also develop deferential relationships with the scientific community. As Christians, we need to abandon our fear of scientific truth in order to find common ground with the scientific community. Physicist Werner Heisenberg reminds us:

> Science, we find, is now focussed on the network of relationships between humans and nature, on the framework which makes us as

> living beings dependent parts of nature, and which we as human beings have simultaneously made the object of our thoughts and actions. Science no longer confronts nature as an objective observer, but sees itself as an actor in this interplay between human persons and nature.[16]

Our base of critical discernment as Christians has to be *within* the community of humankind, not over against it. We need to guard against both pseudo-scientism, i.e. harmful technology fuelled by greed, *and* an arrogant theology that tries to force the universe into narrow biblical categories or to reduce it to theological constructs.[17]

*B. Humility.* The humble, reverent way in which Clare interacted with others is a resource to the modern world as we struggle to overcome an exaggerated subject–object relationship with nature.[18] Clare invites us to a new kind of humility, to see ourselves as one among many species. As humans, our job is to provide a loving consciousness for the universe. As trees provide oxygen and the sun warmth, humans provide a loving consciousness of the universe's embodiment. It is not better than the functions of other species (without oxygen, there would be no one to know and love), but it is a sacred trust to which we must be humbly faithful.

The story of the universe provides the larger setting for the Christian story and also invites us to humility. Can we acknowledge the common myth of evolution as the all-inclusive story and allow it to lead us toward global communication and co-operation?[19] This story provides a needed perspective in which the arrival of *homo sapiens* is seen as the fruit of billions of years of intense activity on the part of the matter that preceded us. Before the earth, before human life, before Christianity, the universe was evolving and preparing for our arrival. To embrace such a cosmic perspective is humbling indeed.

*C. Affectivity.* Both Francis and Clare invite us to regard ourselves, each other and the natural world with a more intense and loving regard and to connect such regard with one's participation in the very life of God. Clare's passionate love affair with God can provide a way for us, as we entertain new ideas about the universe as God's body.

In her ground-breaking work, *Models of God*, Sallie McFague tries to think about the God–world relationship in an as-if fashion. She explores the metaphor of the world as God's body and wonders,

> What if, then, we did not have to go somewhere special (church) or somewhere else (another world) to be in the presence of God but could feel ourselves in that presence at all times and in all places?[20]

McFague reflects themes we meet in Clare: her experience of God as an intimate, generous lover; her affectionate attention to the bodies of her sisters;[21] her love of the body and blood of Christ in the eucharist.

The metaphor of the word as God's body adds new ideas to our understanding of God's relationship to the world. It suggests that God knows and loves the world in an intrinsic, immediate way, as we know our own bodies. It points to God's acceptance of the vulnerability and risk of the cross in an inclusive, suffering love. 'To trust in a God whose body is the world is to trust in a God who cares profoundly for the world.'[22]

The metaphor of the world as God's body leads us to extend Clare's deep sense of loving interdependence with others and with God to the entire universe. It encourages us to relate to the vulnerable and oppressed in a non-hierarchical way with tenderness and care. Sin, then, becomes the refusal to acknowledge this interdependence, the refusal to take 'responsibility for nurturing, loving, and befriending the body and all its parts'.[23] It is the refusal to learn that we are always in God's loving presence and to nurture feelings of tender affection for all species and all elements.

*D. Equality.* Finally, we are called to a more democratized understanding of reality. As Clare respected and included all the sisters in the structures of their life together, we too must respect and include each person, and indeed all creation, in the decisions that affect our planet. Whom will we appoint to be the voice and advocate of the rain forests, the water and the air? We are not destined to be masters and mistresses of the universe, to rule over creation in utilitarian ways. Nature enjoys its own relationship to God so that its wanton destruction is an affront to God's very Self.[24]

We need to explore the moral implications of the ill-treatment of nature. Correction of destructive behaviour toward the world cannot be considered merely in terms of prudence with regard to our own survival. Deliberate and unnecessary destruction of any aspect of the ecosystem infects one's very character and identity, distorting and warping it. One's attitude toward the non-human world directly affects our development and excellence as persons.

The cultivation of these dispositions can help us overcome dispositions of imperialism and support our struggle to save the cosmos from destruction. All of creation, as the cherished activity of God, deserves to be valued for itself as well as for its use to the human community. We who care genuinely for creation experience empathy with it rather than the need to control it. We eschew attitudes of domination in favour of

those of interdependence. We avoid objectification in favour of identification. With a vision of cosmic harmony to lure us, we put ourselves at the service of the cosmos in a spirit of sacrificial love.

To live in hope as we face possible ecological disaster is a difficult and revolutionary activity. But the mandate of the gospel demands that we use the graces of the tradition – Clare of Assisi is one example – and the graces of our own commitment and creative imagination in the service of the universe.

## NOTES

[1] Third Letter of Clare to Agnes of Prague in Regis J. Armstrong (ed), *Clare of Assisi: early documents* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1988), p 45. References in the text to early documents on Clare are from this volume.

[2] In the United States, a well-known 'marker' of this awareness was the publication in 1962 of Rachel Carson's *Silent spring* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin).

[3] Thomas Berry, 'Classical Western spirituality and the American experience' (White Paper).

[4] Lynn White, 'The historical roots of our ecological crisis' in Ian G. Barbour (ed), *Western man and environmental ethics* (Reading MA: Addison-Wesley, 1973). For a critical response to this essay, see John B. Bennett, 'On responding to Lynn White: ecology and Christianity' in *Ohio Journal of Religious Studies* 5 (April 1977), pp 71–77.

[5] Gregory Baum, *Man becoming: God in secular language* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), p 25.

[6] See Anne M. Clifford, 'Feminist perspectives on science: implications for an ecological theology of creation', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 8/2 (Fall 1992), pp 65–90; and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New woman – new earth: sexist ideologies and human liberation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p 204.

[7] In 1993 the Franciscan Press (Quincy IL) published the following studies: Ingrid Peterson, *Clare of Assisi: a biographical study;* Margaret Carney, *The first Franciscan woman;* Marco Bartoli, *Clare of Assisi* (American edition).

[8] We read in the *Legend of Perugia:* 'It is not surprising that fire and other creatures at times showed their respect for him, since, as we who were with him have seen, he loved and respected them with such charity and affection, took so much joy in them, and was moved to such concern and pity over them, that if anyone did not treat them properly he was upset'.

The absence in Francis of the ambivalence toward creation that characterizes the Christian tradition may be explained in part by his lack of formal education. Had he had one, he would probably have been schooled in Neoplatonic categories that looked askance at material creation as a path to God. See Roger D. Sorrell, *St Francis of Assisi and nature, tradition and innovation in Western Christian attitudes towards the environment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[9] A number of theologians address themselves specifically to creation theologies. Examples include Claus Westermann, *Creation* (1974); Jürgen Moltmann, *The future of creation* (1977) and his 1984–85 Gifford Lectures, *God in creation;* Gibson Winter, *Liberating creation: foundations of religious social ethics* (1981); John Cobb, *Is it too late?* and *God and the world;* Matthew Fox, *Original blessing* (1981) and *The coming of the cosmic Christ* (1988); William Butterworth, *Theology of creation;* Zachary Hayes, *What are they saying about creation?;* Dorothy Soelle, *To work and to love: a theology of creation* (1984); Sallie McFague et al (eds), *Liberating life: contemporary approaches to ecological theology* (1990); Thomas Berry, *Befriending the earth* (1991).

[10] See Marco Bartoli, *Clare of Assisi*, p 12.

[11] Margaret Carney, *The first Franciscan woman*, pp 150–154.

[12] Placid Hermann (trans), *XIIIth century chronicles; Jordan of Giano, Thomas of Eccleston, Salimbene degli Adami* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1961), Section 55.

[13] Although we will not examine descriptions of Clare's relationship to Jesus, it is obvious that a consuming relationship with the incarnate God is what fuels her life. Clare summarizes this attitude in her second letter to Agnes of Prague, Clare says of Jesus:

> O most noble Queen,
> gaze upon [Him]
> consider [Him]
> contemplate [Him]
> as you desire to imitate [Him].

The other important relationship to be considered is obviously that between Francis and Clare. One senses that their relationship was characterized by a spirit of love, mutual solidarity, comfort, respect and admiration.

[14] We suffer from a perennial misunderstanding about the virtue of humility – one that emphasizes false self-abnegation, denial of gifts, refusal to become a self. This virtue has been especially problematic for women, whom the Church encourages to be humble and to sacrifice a self that too often has not had a chance to develop.

[15] Elizabeth Petroff, 'A medieval woman's Utopian vision: the Rule of Saint Clare of Assisi' in Libby Falk Jones and Sarah Webster Goodwin (eds), *Feminism, Utopia, and narrative* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991).

[16] W. Heisenberg, *The physicist's conception of nature* (London: Hutchinson, 1958), p 29.

[17] Brian Swimme laments: 'Scientists dropped out of religion because theologians and preachers had nothing interesting to say about the universe. Then, too, they stopped sitting in the pews because the preachers kept explaining to them that their passions and interests, their meaning, their central devotions in life are unimportant – or irrelevant and footnotes to the real truth.' See 'Science: a partner in creation' in Anne Lonergan and Caroline Richards (eds), *Thomas Berry and the new cosmology* (Mystic CT: Twenty-third Publications, 1988), p 85.

[18] Jürgen Moltmann proposes a model of co-operation and communication to replace the dysfunctional subject–object model. In this new model, nature is no longer the subjugated object of humans, but a cohesion of open-life systems with its own subjectivity. Two subjects with different subjectivities enter into a mutual relationship with one another. See *The future of creation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), pp 128–129.

[19] 'The scientific enterprise has produced a creation myth that offers humanity a deeper realization of our bondedness, our profound communion not only within our species, but throughout the living and non-living universe' (Brian Swimme, 'Science: a partner in creation', p 86).

[20] Sallie McFague, *Models of God: theology for an ecological, nuclear age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), p 70.

[21] One must also note the very harsh ascetical practices in which Clare and many medieval women engaged at great cost to their bodies.

[22] McFague, *ibid.*, p 74.

[23] *Ibid.*, p 77.

[24] See John Bennett, 'On the theological use of Whitehead's thought', *Journal of Religious Studies* 8 (Spring 1980), p 7.