

GOING FORWARD ON THE PATH OF PRUDENT HAPPINESS

Perspectives on Liberty and Obedience

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May you go forward securely, joyfully, and swiftly, on the path of prudent happiness, not believing anything, not agreeing with anything that would dissuade you from this resolution or that would place a stumbling block for you on the way . . .

Second letter of Clare to Agnes of Prague¹

THE PRIMARY PURPOSE OF THIS article is to explore the relevance of Clare's life and legacy for dealing with contemporary ecclesial concerns related to liberty and obedience. I propose to accomplish this objective by means of three considerations. The first consideration focuses on the circumstances that contributed to Clare becoming the first woman religious to write a rule of her own and have it approved by the Church. The second consideration examines Clare's experience of living with the tension of neither breaking with the Church nor giving up her pursuit of what she felt called to do. The third takes up the question of what Clare's example can teach us about our own approaches to dealing with ecclesiastical authority in matters regarding liberty and obedience.

Living the rule of life with integrity

. . . strive always to imitate the way of holy simplicity, humility and poverty and [to preserve] the integrity of our holy way of living, as we were taught from the beginning of our conversion by Christ and our blessed father Francis.²

In an effort to understand how Clare came to be the first woman to write a rule of her own, it is important to keep in mind the unusual quality and quantity of relationships that she had with the ecclesiastical authorities of her day, beginning with the bishop of Assisi³ and extending to six popes.

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In 1212, sometime after Clare's decision to follow Francis, he provided her with a simple Form of Life.⁴ In her Testament, Clare makes reference to this Form of Life and explains how it was given to ensure that she and her sisters would always persevere in holy poverty.⁵ In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council forbade the founding of new religious orders. Unlike Francis, who was fortunate enough to receive verbal approval for his order from the pope in 1209, Clare found herself and her sisters subject to the Council's mandate. As a consequence, the Poor Ladies were obliged by ecclesiastical authorities to accept the Rule of St Benedict. Distressed by this imposition, Clare made a direct appeal to Pope Innocent III (1198–1216). It is believed the Pope was already familiar with Clare and her manner of life inasmuch as she, along with the Beguine leader Marie d'Oignies, were both given considerable attention in the writings of the ecclesiastical chronicler Jacques de Vitry.⁶

In Clare's request to the Pope, she asked him to grant her the Privilege of Poverty so that she and the sisters at San Damiano could continue to follow the Form of Life given to them by Francis. At the heart of this privilege was a papal assurance that no one could compel Clare and her sisters to receive possessions.⁷ Shortly before his death, Innocent III granted this unprecedented request that exempted the Poor Ladies from what Clare perceived to be the most problematic aspect of monasticism, the ownership of goods.

During the pontificate of Honorius III (1216–1227), Clare and the Poor Ladies were placed under the immediate jurisdiction of the Pope rather than the authority of local bishops. Cardinal Hugolino, who had been entrusted with responsibility for their care under the administration of the previous pope, was appointed once again by order of Honorius. Disturbed by the fact that so many women desiring to live lives of total commitment were neglected or rejected by the religious men with whom they shared a charism,⁸ Hugolino took it upon himself to write a special rule for the Poor Ladies of San Damiano in 1219.⁹ His objective was to safeguard what he understood to be Clare's best interests. Though Hugolino acknowledged the Privilege of Poverty in his Rule, he was intent on giving it his own interpretation as well as a broader context. In requiring Clare and her sisters to observe the Benedictine Rule in all things, he firmly advanced the position that it was in no way contrary to the Form of Life given to them by Francis.¹⁰

As their Cardinal Protector, and later as pope, there is substantial evidence to suggest that Hugolino held Clare and her sisters in high esteem. Frequently, he sought out their prayerful support, advice and

intercession. Nevertheless, early on in his pontificate, Gregory IX (1227–1241) presumed once again to know what was in Clare's best interest and attempted to persuade her to abandon the Privilege of Poverty once and for all. 'If you fear for your vow, We absolve you from it,' he declared. But Clare resisted strongly and would not comply with his request. 'Holy Father,' she said, 'I will never in any way wish to be absolved from the following of Christ.'¹¹ In light of her unwavering conviction and insistence, Gregory reconfirmed Clare's Privilege of Poverty. Given his own particular concern for the welfare of the Poor Ladies, he also appointed Raynaldus, his own nephew, to take his place as their Cardinal Protector.

During the later years of Gregory's pontificate, political turbulence and ecclesiastical intrigue demanded the full attention of religious authorities. Frederick II, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, posed a far greater challenge to the Church than Clare of Assisi and her Privilege of Poverty. After Gregory's death, Celestine IV (1241) was elected pope, but died six months afterwards. For two chaotic years following his death, the Church remained without a pope. Finally, after the election of Innocent IV (1243–1254), the Church was in a position to regain some measure of its equilibrium. One of the surest signs of this reality was the fact that Clare and her sisters emerged once again as a papal preoccupation.

From the time of Gregory IX through the years leading up to the pontificate of Innocent IV, the Church witnessed the rapid growth of Clare's Order. As Cardinal Protector, Raynaldus accompanied the establishment of numerous foundations in various countries. Throughout the Order, however, Clare's followers continued to express their ongoing dissatisfaction with the Rule of Hugolino and its insistence upon professing the Rule of St Benedict.¹² Initially, Innocent IV offered no response to this discontent other than to uphold Hugolino's Rule. In 1247, he tried a different strategy and decided to write a Rule of his own. Upon its completion, Innocent issued a papal decree requiring adherence to his Rule. The mandate, however, failed to accomplish his objective. Though Innocent succeeded in providing an alternative to the Rule of Benedict, his own formulations were far from adequate or acceptable. He too failed to grasp the fact that radical poverty was the essential foundation of Clare's life and charism.¹³ More likely than not, Raynaldus perceived the flaws of Innocent's Rule early on. Still, it was not until three years later that Innocent himself acknowledged the error of his presumption. In 1250, he issued another papal bull declaring that no sister could be forced to accept his Rule.¹⁴

During this period it is believed that, with the encouragement of Raynaldus, Clare began to put into words the Rule that for decades had found its clearest expression in the living out of her life. Whether or not Clare was the sole author of her Rule is open for discussion; that she personally accompanied its development and provided much of its significant content is rarely questioned. In 1252, Raynaldus approved her Rule in the name of the pope. Clare, however, weakened by illness and sensing her imminent death, insisted upon the personal approval of Innocent IV. On 9 August 1253, after nearly forty years of holding fast to her vision and vocation, despite the protestations, persuasions and presumptions of ecclesiastical authorities,¹⁵ Clare received papal approbation of her rule. She died the following day.

Though some find the convergence of Clare's death and the approval of her rule to be a stretch of the hagiographic imagination, for many it continues to be a sign of hope and inspiration. Inasmuch as Clare's preferred manner of instruction was example, it is important to recognize the way in which Clare's entire life embodied the spirit of her Rule. To this end, we do well to recall the words of Raynaldus, who, as Pope Alexander IV, declared in the Bull of Canonization:

[Clare's] life was an instruction and a lesson to others who learned the rule of living in *this book of life* (Apoc 21:27). The remainder learned to behold the path of life in this mirror of life.¹⁶

The wisdom of watchfulness

Keep most careful watch that you never depart from this (most holy life and poverty) by reason of the teaching or advice of anyone.¹⁷

Let us be very careful, therefore, that, if we have set out on the path of the Lord, we do not at any time turn away from it through our own fault or negligence or ignorance.¹⁸

As a woman of Assisi, as a woman in the Church and as a woman in the sacred space of San Damiano, Clare was attuned to the exigencies of obedience as well as those of liberty. Convinced that by divine inspiration she was entrusted with a form of life characterized by radical poverty, Clare was unrelenting in her efforts to have these ideals accepted and ratified by the Church on God's terms as well as her own.¹⁹ In the struggle to set forth the terms of the Form of Life given to her by Francis, Clare believed it would be impossible to ensure and safeguard her vision and vocation without a Rule of her own. From

Clare's vantage point, a rule of life could not be arbitrary or generic. As an essential and necessary guide for life in the Spirit, a Rule had to give authentic expression to God's intention for her and her sisters. It had to demonstrate the correspondence between a life of radical poverty and a life of radical communion.

Throughout the course of her life, Clare committed herself to advocating a form of life that required nothing less than the radical reorientation of all relationships, both human and divine. Though many figures of authority in her life failed to grasp the immediate and ultimate significance of this commitment, Clare remained faithful to the 'pursuit of that perfection to which the Spirit of the Lord had called her'.²⁰ Fidelity to this commitment was at the heart of Clare's *calling and choice*.²¹ Clare recognized that going forward 'on the path of prudent happiness' required the wisdom of watchfulness and a great deal of personal resolve.²² It meant that one had to have a sufficient sense of self to hold fast to the call of the Spirit, especially in the face of obstacles and affliction.²³

Ever vigilant, Clare was painfully aware of the relational claims that different authorities made on her life. Perhaps it was because of this sensitivity that she readily perceived with great clarity the interconnectedness of the authority of God, others and herself. Though *divine authority* took precedence over *outer authority*, Clare was attuned to the fact that *outer authority*, as exercised by ecclesiastical leaders, remained a powerful and influential force in her life. Grounded in her own experience of *inner authority*, however, Clare was not easily threatened or controlled. Without being impudent, she simply held her ground. To the extent that she saw through the illusions of earthly permanence as well as errors of human presumption, she learned to live with the questions that the truth of her own life raised for herself, for her sisters, for the Church and the world.

Given what we can surmise about Clare's experience of *divine authority*, we know that she had a profound sense of God's abiding presence. This fact is not unrelated to her apparent sense of *inner authority*. Unlike many other mystics, Clare was not moved by fear or despair. Nowhere is there evidence to suggest that she ever felt abandoned by the God who called her by name. She was not given over to despondency. She constantly relied on the power of prayer, confident that God would always defend her.²⁴

Admittedly, it is difficult to sort out whether Clare's self-confidence was rooted in her sense of God or whether her ability to trust God was rooted in her ability to trust herself. In either case, she experienced the

liberty necessary to gain perspective on the limits of the Church's authority as well as her own. This perspective enabled her to remain hopeful and humble. Ultimately, it shaped her evolving understanding of liberty and obedience as it contributed to her ability to embrace radical poverty in the context of radical relationship.

As the spiritual and practical significance of Clare's response to divine inspiration continues to engage our imagination eight hundred years after her birth, it is important to realize how her form of life proved to be a positive force in the process of her own humanization. By stripping herself of everything, Clare not only imitated the poor Christ, but attempted to fathom the mystery of his incarnation so as to experience the implications of this mystery for all human relationships. Clare's ability to recognize the presence of God in every person was at the heart of her ability to enter into this mystery. It was also at the heart of her ability to attend to the vulnerability and grace that set her in relationship to recognize in every human person a sister or a brother. Always conscious of her dependence on God's grace as well as the contingencies and reversals to which every human person and institution can fall prey, Clare perceived the trappings of life for what they were and recognized their dehumanizing consequences for the powerless and powerful alike. Perhaps it was this ability to perceive what others failed to see that her followers and protectors found so attractive and compelling. Perhaps it was Clare's authentic response to God and to others that captured the imaginations of countless noble ladies and queens,²⁵ not to mention numerous bishops and popes.

In summary, it is impossible to understand the life of Clare without taking into full account her love for the Church and her desire to be a part of it. Unlike many other fervent women and men of her time, Clare's vision of holiness did not lead her away from the Church. Though she was misunderstood, patronized and imposed upon by the dictates of ecclesiastical leaders, she always remained conscious of her beginning.²⁶ Prepared to meet adversity with wisdom and integrity, Clare chose to obey more from love than from fear.²⁷ Steadfast in her conviction that there was nothing to be gained by breaking with the Church, Clare cultivated the wisdom of watchfulness. Drawing strength from her faith in God, her faith in others and her faith in herself,²⁸ Clare readily assumed a posture of prudent fidelity. This, rather than blind submission, characterized her approach to obedience. This, rather than individual self-interest, characterized her approach to liberty.

Sowing the seeds of perfect justice

[Clare] sowed the seeds of perfect justice and showed her footprints to her followers by her own manner of walking.²⁹

As the legacy of Clare is reflected upon by those outside her order, there is always the chance that, like Hugolino and Innocent, we too will fail to grasp the obvious and hidden meanings of her life and legacy. Conscious of the fact that this may be inevitable, I preface these final thoughts by saying that they are simply my impressions of what I perceive to be some of the insights to be gained for my own life as I observe Clare's footprints and reflect upon her manner of walking.

As a woman who shunned the feudal character of monasticism because of its hierarchical distinctions and material privileges, Clare presented a serious challenge to a Church that mirrored the manor more than the reign of God. In the light of her times and the large number of women who were drawn to her particular charism, it is not surprising that Clare's form of life was repeatedly subjected to the interpretation and scrutiny of church authorities who believed themselves to be acting in her best interest. In the light of this fact, I believe there are three lessons that Clare can teach us about sowing seeds of justice in our times – seeds that will contribute to our own efforts to make meaning of our experiences of liberty, obedience and relationships with authority.

The first lesson deals with the seeds of justice that give rise to a bias for faith. Living, as we do, in cultures of doubt and disbelief, Clare extends to us both an invitation and an example of what it means creatively to recompose one's faith in the midst of difficulties. In part, this means understanding divine inspiration as a process, a divine call that evolves and develops over time. To believe that God knows what God is about is an act of faith and more. Clare alerts us to the fact that faith in God corresponds to faith in oneself and others. In this regard, faith begets faith and requires of us nothing less than everything.

The second lesson reminds us that a bias for hope is a necessity of life. Where God's grace is the source of vocational call, the errors of ecclesiastical presumption cannot prevail indefinitely. In time all things change, even the mind of the Church. Because all things change, nothing can be taken for granted. Nothing can be assumed, nothing can be guaranteed. Grounded in a belief in God and God's holy manner of working, we must be vigilant in good times and in bad. In this regard, presumption is more of a threat to the living out of obedience and liberty than despair. Prudent fidelity is not about acquiescence or complacency.

The actions of every human authority must be examined in terms of their correspondence to God's holy manner of working. There is a danger, however, in claiming to know God's intention and giving definitive interpretations to God's action. The danger is that we close ourselves off from God's ongoing revelation and, rather than living in hope, we settle for the human confines of presumption and despair. Far from exhorting us with simply a pious platitude about obedience, Clare teaches us to recognize the necessary difference between an obedience that is grounded in presumption or despair and an obedience that is grounded in hope.

Finally, the third lesson that provides us with another seed of justice alerts us to the necessity of a bias for love. Clearly, nothing substitutes for a life of holiness, and what else is holiness but having the courage to experience the heart of God? This seed of justice serves as a reminder that there can be no reverence for one's own liberty or that of another without a profound awareness of the essence of each person, a recognition of *who* they are rather than *what* they are. The issue is not one of having greater respect for authorities; the issue is one of not having less respect than is appropriate for every person made in the image and likeness of God.

To harvest the seeds of justice sown by Clare is to discover that neither prudence, patience and courage, nor compassion, mutuality and solicitude, can be learned in the abstract. What Clare teaches us about liberty and obedience she teaches by example alone.

Conclusion

Throughout her life, Clare remained mindful of the fact that 'one thing was necessary' (Luke 10:24). *By means of example and witness*, she encouraged those who followed her to do the same.³⁰ I highlight Clare's adherence to this particular counsel as a conclusion to this reflection, because I believe it may provide an important key to understanding one of the fundamental spiritual insights that guided her discernment of liberty and obedience. In the light of this conjecture, I offer two final observations. First, to partake in the heritage of Clare it is necessary to recognize that, apart from the experience of radical attentiveness to God and to God's word, liberty and obedience are devoid of meaning. And second, to learn from Clare's example it is necessary to acknowledge that, apart from human relationships characterized by humility, mutuality and disponibility, the capacity to listen (understood as the essence of obedience) and the ability to choose (understood as the criterion for liberty) can never be fully realized.

NOTES

- ¹ See Regis F. Armstrong OFM Cap (ed and trans), *Clare of Assisi: early documents* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press), 1988, p 41.
- ² See Testament of St Clare 56, in Armstrong, p 58.
- ³ An interesting hagiographic account worthy of note is found in the *Legend of St Clare* 7. (On the morning of Palm Sunday, 1212), 'something occurred that was a fitting omen: as the other [young women] were going to receive their palms, while Clare remained immobile in her place out of shyness, the Bishop, coming down the steps, *came to her and placed a palm in her hands*. On that night, preparing to obey the command of the saint, she embarked upon her long desired flight with a virtuous companion.' See Armstrong, p 196.
- ⁴ See Rule of St Clare VI:3, in Armstrong, p 69.
- ⁵ See Testament of St Clare 33-36, in Armstrong, p 56.
- ⁶ See Testimony of Jacques de Vitry (1216) in Armstrong, pp 245-246.
- ⁷ See Privilege of Poverty of Pope Innocent III (1216) 7, in Armstrong, p 84.
- ⁸ See Armstrong, p 87.
- ⁹ See Rule of Cardinal Hugolino (1219) in Armstrong, pp 87-96.
- ¹⁰ See Rule of Cardinal Hugolino (1219) 3, in Armstrong, pp 88-89.
- ¹¹ See *Legend of St Clare* 14, in Armstrong, p 205.
- ¹² See Armstrong, p 109.
- ¹³ See Armstrong, p 29.
- ¹⁴ Armstrong, p 23.
- ¹⁵ See Acts of the Process of Canonization (1253) 2:22, 3:14, in Armstrong, pp 139, 141.
- ¹⁶ See Bull of Canonization (1255) 10, in Armstrong, p 180.
- ¹⁷ See Rule of St Clare VI:7-9, in Armstrong, p 69.
- ¹⁸ See Testament of St Clare 74, in Armstrong, p 59.
- ¹⁹ Armstrong, p 24.
- ²⁰ See Second Letter of St Clare to Agnes of Prague (1235) 14, in Armstrong, p 41.
- ²¹ See Testament of St Clare 16, in Armstrong, p 55.
- ²² See Second Letter 13, in Armstrong, p 41.
- ²³ See Second Letter of St Clare to Agnes of Prague (1235) 13-14, in Armstrong, p 41.
- ²⁴ See *Legend of St Clare* 22, in Armstrong, p 22.
- ²⁵ See *Legend* 11, in Armstrong, p 201.
- ²⁶ See Second Letter 11, in Armstrong, p 40.
- ²⁷ See Rule of St Clare, IV:9, in Armstrong, p 66.
- ²⁸ See Armstrong, p 18.
- ²⁹ See *Legend* 10, in Armstrong, p 199.
- ³⁰ See Second Letter of St Clare to Agnes of Prague 10, in Armstrong, p 40.