

SOLITUDE

By PAT HOWES

AT MY CLOTHING AS A POOR CLARE NOVICE, the abbess put to me the question, 'What do you ask of this community?' Part of my response was, 'Teach me to live in solitude and silence' and 'to live . . . enclosure'. It is this aspect of our life that I would like to examine here: solitude, apartness, enclosure, its meaning for Clare and its meaning today.

When Clare left home to join Francis she spent a short time in the Benedictine monastery of San Paolo delle Abbadesse, then moved to Sant' Angelo in Panzo for a while before being taken by Francis to San Damiano. At San Paolo she experienced traditional monastic life, though not as a member of the community (it appears that she was there as a lay servant). At Sant' Angelo she experienced one of the new forms of religious life which were becoming common in Europe in her day. In neither place did Clare find the life she felt called to, so she moved on to San Damiano.

San Damiano was the church in which St Francis, praying before the crucifix, was told, 'Go, repair my Church'. In 1206, or about then, Francis did repair San Damiano and while doing so he shouted in French to some passers-by, 'Come and help me build the monastery of San Damiano, because ladies will dwell here who will glorify our heavenly Father throughout His holy Church by their celebrated and holy manner of life'.¹ Clare herself preserved for us this saying of Francis. She wrote of it in her Testament, seeing in it her beginning and that of her sisters, but San Damiano was a church, not a monastery (though it has been suggested that it had once been a monastery).² Did Clare go to San Damiano intending to live an enclosed, monastic, life, or was she thinking of something more on the lines of the community at Sant' Angelo and the Beguine movement? Or did Clare, in fact, not have a clear idea at that time? Did she simply live each day with the Lord and wait for the community to evolve? Jacques de Vitry saw similarities between the Poor Ladies and the Beguines, so it is unlikely that they were living a formal monastic life when he saw them,³ yet the community must have been enclosed within the few years immediately following Lateran Council IV (1215). When Francis died (1226) the sisters saw his body through 'the little window through which the servants of Christ

were accustomed to receive the sacrament of the Body of the Lord'⁴ and, if that is so, the sisters were certainly living an enclosed life by then.

When Clare left home in 1212, was this the kind of life she envisaged? Poverty was all important to her; we know that, for before leaving home she gave away all that she had and even some of her sister's inheritance too! She envisaged a life of community, sisterhood, even then, for she prayed for Catherine, her sister, to join her. Did she envisage a life of enclosure? Clare was a woman of her day, a day in which there were walls around cities, when women lived a fairly secluded life in general; Clare is unlikely to have imagined she could live the life of the friars. (There were exceptions to this general state: in heretical groups like the Cathars women were in positions of leadership and travelled around preaching, and around 1240 there were groups of minoresses living a wandering life.) To see what Clare intended we can look to her Rule and her letters, but these were not written at the beginning of her religious life; by the time she wrote them events in the Church as a whole had already played their part in shaping life for Clare and her community.

The early thirteenth century saw the beginning of many small religious communities of women right across Europe. This was a matter of concern for the Church, especially in view of the growth of heretical movements at the time. The legislation of Lateran IV can be viewed as a response to this. That it, and the subsequent giving of the Rules of Hugolino (1218 or 1219) and of Innocent IV (1247), shaped the life of Clare and her sisters at San Damiano is clear, bringing the introduction of strict enclosure.⁵ What is not clear is whether Clare would have organized their life in a different way had it not been for the Council and the popes. Lateran IV prohibited new forms of religious life, insisting that communities should take an already existing Rule. At this point Clare and her sisters had no Rule, just a Form of Life which St Francis had given them. It appears that Francis moved Clare in the direction of the Benedictine Rule, for Sister Pacifica de Guelfuccio, the first witness in the Process of Canonization, tells us that, 'Three years after St Clare had been in the Order, at the prayers and insistence of St Francis, who almost forced her, she accepted the direction and government of the sisters'.⁶ In the *Legend of St Clare* we learn that Clare tried to decline the name and office of abbess, wishing to be placed under others rather than above them,⁷ but that she accepted the title at the insistence of St Francis. It is probable that the title of 'abbess' went with the taking of the Benedictine Rule, for it was the sister in charge of a Benedictine monastery who held this title. Clare accepted the Benedictine Rule but safeguarded her Franciscan charism by petitioning the pope for the Privilege of Poverty (1215).⁸

Seclusion was a mark of some of the new groups of religious women. They tended to be near the cities, living in a relationship of mutuality with them, but defending their apartness.⁹ It is evident that seclusion was important to Clare, for the only exception she made to her insistence on poverty was for the 'integrity and privacy of the monastery'.¹⁰ Writing of people joining the community, Clare says in her Rule, 'Thereafter, she may not go outside the monastery except for some useful, reasonable, evident, and approved purpose'.¹¹ The norm was to be that the sisters were enclosed.

Clare went to San Damiano in 1212 and lived there until her death in 1253. In that time we have a legend of her going out to share a meal with St Francis at the Portiuncola¹² and we know that she considered going to Morocco to share the fate of the martyred friars.¹³ The sister who spoke of this in the Process of Canonization took Clare sufficiently seriously for us to be rash to dismiss it as merely a pious wish.

However, in the end Clare spent forty-one years, nearly forty-two, in one place. This may be taken as clearer evidence of her desire and intention for a life of solitude than many words could give us. In her writings she does not say much about enclosure. There is the passage already mentioned, in the Rule, about not going out 'except for some useful, reasonable, evident and approved purpose'. There is also considerable detail about the practicalities of enclosure – who holds the keys, who may or may not speak to whom and where they may speak – but as there are areas which must be covered in Constitutions today if an Order wishes them to be approved by Rome, so it is reasonable to think this detail would also have been necessary for Clare to obtain approval of her Rule. The legal prescriptions we have in Clare's Rule are largely those found in the Rules of Hugolino and Innocent but in briefer form, and in their Rules there was nothing comparable to Clare's sentence about going out for a 'useful, reasonable, evident and approved' purpose. The only reason they allowed for going out was to found another monastery.

In the small corpus of her writings, Clare's letters to Agnes of Prague are particularly significant and raise an interesting question about solitude. We have a sense of Agnes as a faithful follower of Clare and of Clare accepting her as such. Agnes' community had a hospital next door to it and the sisters cared for the people there.¹⁴ Clare must have known of this but there is no sign that she disapproved. Clare's understanding of the solitude necessary for our life must, therefore, have been wider than the strict enclosure of Poor Clare life through the centuries would imply. Clare's letters have no explicit mention of enclosure. She uses the word

only of Mary carrying Christ 'in the little enclosure of her holy womb'.¹⁵ While it is possible to build a theology of enclosure upon that and the paragraph which follows it, the probability is that to do so is to build a house of cards; Clare has said nothing explicit enough for us to be sure we build upon her teachings and not just upon our own ideas.

In 1212, then, Clare went to San Damiano, perhaps to a building already adapted for monastic life or perhaps to a rather informal set-up. Either way, by 1219 (Hugolino's Rule) the buildings were adapted and they were living the life of a cloistered community. It has been suggested that enclosure was imposed by the Church and that Clare accepted it in order to obtain the Privilege of Poverty. Clare was a woman of her time. She was part of a far wider movement of women within the Church, living a life that Jacques de Vitry was able to recognize from his contact with the Beguines in Flanders.¹⁶ Clare was a strong woman. When the friars were withdrawn from San Damiano as chaplains Clare sent away those friars who begged in order to support her community, thus declaring a virtual hunger strike. Throughout her life she fought for the Privilege of Poverty. Had enclosure been contrary to Clare's vision for the community she would have fought against it.

Celano speaks of Clare settling at San Damiano, 'as if casting the anchor of her soul in a secure site'.¹⁷ This image is worth exploring a little. An anchor holds a ship fast while the waters flow around it. If you are close in to port, you tie the ship to something on land; it is only if a little out from land that you cast your anchor. Clare 'cast her anchor' at San Damiano. She settled, but the waters flowed around her and every so often a wave broke over the community. She was part of something much wider than her own community: the Franciscan Order; and she lived in a place very special to Francis and Franciscans. Clare stayed at San Damiano but others came to her there. When Francis needed advice, he sent to Clare;¹⁸ when the brothers were martyred in Morocco, news came to Clare. She and her sisters were, so to speak, at the hub of the Franciscan wheel. They lived in one place but they reached out a long way through their prayer. For the local people too, Clare and her sisters were 'there', present. The people brought their sick to San Damiano and their problems. In this we touch something of the meaning of enclosure today – to be present for others, for the Church and the world.

The Order of St Clare sees its beginning in 1212, when Clare moved to San Damiano. When the Privilege of Poverty was issued in 1215 and Clare became abbess, the Order began to have a formal place within the structures of the Church. The decrees of Lateran IV ensured that the

solitude which was already a characteristic of the life of the sisters took shape in enclosure. Since then the life of the Order has continued to be affected by the decrees of popes and councils and by canon law. In 1298 Boniface VIII issued the Bull *Periculoso*, stating that nuns were neither to leave their enclosure nor to receive outsiders.¹⁹ This was reaffirmed by the Council of Trent, which tightened up the practical restrictions of enclosure, placing all convents of nuns under the control of the bishop.²⁰ Today Canon Law tells us,

667.2 A stricter discipline of cloister is to be observed in monasteries ordered to the contemplative life.

667.3 Monasteries of nuns which are totally ordered to the contemplative life must observe papal cloister, namely according to the norms given by the Apostolic See.²¹

It refers us to *Venite seorsum* 7, which, after telling us that enclosure 'is a tried and unquestionable advantage for the contemplative life',²² proceeds to give rules and regulations of who may enter and leave enclosure and why. The rules are for 'nuns dedicated wholly to contemplation' and it is hard not to wonder why different rules are necessary for male and female contemplative life. Is there something of male domination about this? The legislation applies to all female contemplatives, yet the spirituality of Poor Clares is very different from that of Carmelites and might be better served by legislation written specifically with them in mind. Many are the times when in community meetings we have expressed longing for Clare's down to earth practicality, for legislation which simply says a sister may leave enclosure for 'some useful, reasonable, evident and approved purpose'. But whatever the motivation behind the legislation and the irritation of legislation which shows so little trust in the commitment and dedication of individuals and communities, enclosure itself has been an aspect of our life since its beginnings and is something we choose. It facilitates the solitude which is of the essence of our vocation.

Some years ago in 1989 my own community went through a process of discernment. At one point in this we asked ourselves what are the few *essential* characteristics of Poor Clare life, the things which we definitely want to hold fast to. Among the five things we came up with and which we were all agreed upon was enclosure. However, while it is a foundational characteristic of Poor Clare life, it is one which is interpreted differently in different houses. Interpretations range from seeing it as a way of sharing the kenosis of Christ, or a way of joining ourselves to Christ in his passion, to seeing it as simply having a practical value in

facilitating contemplative life. Owing to the different understandings of enclosure, the ways it is lived in different houses can vary.

Enclosure: the first meaning that word had for me was to do with changes in agriculture in English history, the change from strip farming to closed fields, a change which gave the English landscape its characteristic look of today. Enclosure: a space which is closed in. Highly irrelevant as this initial contact with the word might seem to the tangible reality of enclosure in my life today, it does express something of the change that came in my life when I moved inside enclosure. My life had its own 'strip' before then, in which I lived and worked, with ready contact with the many people whose strips were near to mine, and it was possible to move from my strip at times to visit others. When I came here the physical bounds of my world were limited. There is a wall around the garden and for most of the time I am within that space of house and garden. My life is still touched by others (family and friends come to visit; people come, write or phone to ask for prayers) but the number of people I meet each day or year is much reduced. So, my 'world' has shrunk, yet the way I experience it is that my horizons have widened, opened out, that I am now less limited by time and space. There is paradox in that, but it is the truth as I experience it.

The meaning of enclosure today is very much the same as its meaning in Clare's day. We are seeking God. The primary relationship for each of us is our relationship with God. We limit our physical world because we experience a call from God to do so, and that limiting enables us to go deeper and dwell with the One who created us. We are not hermits. We have not 'gone apart' alone; we are in community and have come apart with our sisters. And it is generally our sisters who play the part of the 'refiner's fire and the fullers' alkali' (Malachi 3:3) so that we might become the people whom God, our creator, is calling us to be. As we live with our sisters so we are mirrors of God to them (we hope!) and they to us, and the light (again, we hope) reflects outwards.

The experience of the hostages in Lebanon can perhaps help us to understand enclosure, especially the experience of Brian Keenan as he has related it.²³ Once taken hostage, Brian Keenan lived in a confined space, with extremely limited contact with others, apart from his cell-mate, John McCarthy. The effect of this was that he delved into himself, came to know himself, and came gradually to trust John McCarthy. Their 'enclosure' brought about openness, communication and intimacy, and a receptivity to each other that is not often reached in an ordinary situation. Their enclosure was forced upon them, where ours is chosen, but many of its effects are the same. We choose to limit

ourselves in many ways, yet experience these limitations as an opening onto the infinite. In ordinary circumstances Brian Keenan and John McCarthy were unlikely to become close (a Protestant from Northern Ireland and someone from an English public school background). Similarly, a Poor Clare community often comprises women from a wide spectrum of society. The diversity of the world is represented within the community, and the way in which we live together in harmony and move towards greater openness and communication is itself a prayer for the world and a sign that people can live together in peace.

Human beings are social beings but are also individuals, each needing their own space. Marriage today is under more strain than perhaps at any time in history, for more is expected of the relationship, yet for a marriage to be healthy both partners need to recognize their need of individual space as well as their need to relate. Without that space they will suffocate each other and the relationship will suffer. This need for individual space, which in Christian terms connects to the need to be alone before the Alone, the Creator, is something which is real in each person's life, and which can lead to psychological problems if ignored. I would suggest that this is something which we, in our life of solitude, of enclosure, write large for all to see.

Bartoli, the Italian historian who has contributed so much to study of Clare, says:

The community of San Damiano was an eremitical community right from the start . . . They sought to live their life of prayer in isolation and separation from the world. Enclosure was not added later, but was there from the very beginning. However . . . right from the beginning Francis and Clare also thought of San Damiano as being an open community.²⁴

From my reading of the history and from my own lived experience of Poor Clare life, I would suggest that Bartoli is right. Throughout the history of our Order it has been readily accepted that Clare intended a life of enclosure²⁵ but few people have thought that 'Francis and Clare also thought of San Damiano as being an open community'. Here is where the decrees of the Church changed the life which Clare began, in particular the Bull *Periculoso* of Pope Boniface VIII. The isolation insisted upon in the Bull was not the way Clare lived. Had it been so, we could not have the many accounts, in the Process of Canonization, of people coming to her and being helped. Clare and Assisi were interdependent, and saw themselves to be so (e.g. Clare prayed for the safety of the city when the Saracens came; c. 1232 the city paid for extra buildings at San

Damiano). I would suggest that the seclusion of Poor Clare life is something we need to both live and defend, but that we must do so within an atmosphere of openness.

I was privileged to spend some months in the Poor Clare monastery at Mbarara, Uganda. It was there that I experienced the life as I think Clare intended it to be. The monastery at Mbarara is at Nyamitanga, which is basically a Catholic hill. The cathedral, bishop's house, Catholic schools, a few different religious houses: all are there at Nyamitanga. (This is a historical accident really: when the missionaries came the chief gave them a hill. The Moslems have another hill.) So the monastery is at the heart of the Catholic world in Mbarara. While I was there there was a meeting of bishops gathered at the cathedral and several called in at the monastery. The friars have a house the other side of Mbarara and a parish some twenty miles off, and often they call in on the monastery. There is a real sense of being brother and sister, of family and sharing. What one has is there to be shared, so the friars lent the sisters their car to drive us (four visiting English Poor Clares, preparing for a foundation in Kenya) to the border when we moved on. The friars are active in preaching and teaching, they move around a lot. The Clares are there praying for them, supporting them. The life of the Poor Clares makes most sense when thus connected to the life of the Church as a whole and the friars in particular. Unconnected to the wider context, there is danger of the life becoming closed in.

My hope for the Order, as we celebrate 800 years since the birth of Clare, is that we may increasingly embrace enclosure with that openness of spirit which I see in Clare and which I experienced at Mbarara. As we live the solitude which is at the heart of our vocation, my hope is that, wherever there are monasteries of our Order, our life may be the positive force for good today that Clare and her sisters were in the Assisi of their day.

NOTES

¹ Testament of Clare 13-14, in Regis J. Armstrong OFM Cap (ed and trans), *Clare of Assisi: early documents* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1988).

² Marino Bigaroni OFM, 'San Damiano - Assisi: the first church of St Francis' in *Franciscan Studies* (New York, 1988).

³ Letter, in *Early documents*, p 245. This was written in 1216; did he see them that year or earlier?

⁴ Thomas of Celano, *First life of St Francis* 2:116 in *Early documents*, p 259.

⁵ Brenda Bolton, 'Mulieres sanctae', *Studies in Church History* (1973), p 88.

⁶ Process of Canonization 1:6, in *Early documents*, p 130.

⁷ *The legend of St Clare* 12, in *Early documents*. The *Legend* is the official (first) biography of Clare.

⁸ I take as implied in the title of abbess that Clare took the Benedictine Rule at this point, but it may be that the two things were separate and that the community only took the Benedictine Rule in 1218 or 1219, with the giving of Hugolino's Constitutions.

- ⁹ Marco Bartoli, *Clare of Assisi*, p 79 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1993).
- ¹⁰ Testament 54.
- ¹¹ Rule 2:12 in *Early documents*.
- ¹² *Little flowers* 15 in Marion A. Habig (ed), *St Francis of Assisi: omnibus of sources* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973), p 1332.
- ¹³ Process of Canonization 6:6.
- ¹⁴ Bartoli, p 92.
- ¹⁵ Third Letter to St Agnes of Prague (3 Agnes) 19 in *Early documents*.
- ¹⁶ *Early documents*, p 246; Bartoli, pp 67–80.
- ¹⁷ *Legend* 10.
- ¹⁸ Bonaventure, *Legenda major* 7:2 in *St Francis of Assisi: omnibus of sources* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973), p 722.
- ¹⁹ Diarmuid O'Murchu, *The seed must die* (Dublin: Veritas, 1980), p 51.
- ²⁰ Karl Rahner and others (eds), *Sacramentum mundi* vol 5 (London: Burns and Oates, 1969), p 310.
- ²¹ James A. Coriden, Thomas J. Green, Donald E. Heintschel (eds), *The code of canon law: a text and commentary* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985).
- ²² In Austin Flannery OP (ed), *Vatican Council II: the conciliar and post-conciliar documents* (Leominster: Fowler Wright, 1981).
- ²³ Brian Keenan, *An evil cradling* (London: Hutchinson, 1992).
- ²⁴ Bartoli, p 85.
- ²⁵ Some people question this today, suggesting it was because she lived when she did, but the fact is that she did live then, so she founded as was fitting in the thirteenth century.