

# CLARE ELSEWHERE

By VERONICA NAMOYO

**C**HIARA DI OFFREDUCCIO is celebrating her eight-hundredth birthday. Her daughters are making the best of the occasion, and for the first time they are able to enjoy many of the birthday parties in different countries and even on different continents without leaving their cherished cloisters. Only Lady Poverty limits the proliferation of video-cassettes which travel from monastery to monastery in honour of the patron saint of television. Most of her disciples have, however, to borrow the means of viewing these modern recordings, and not all of them approve even of the borrowing. This is part of the diversity which has always been a feature of her Order.

The diversity appears clearly also in the exterior celebrations: a summer display of flowers graces a Welsh monastery; one federation in the USA has gathered scholarly Franciscans and Clares to study different aspects of Clare's message; at an Indian mass a tray of lights, blossoms and incense is presented in graceful gesture; guitars vibrate in Brazil; an exultant Zambian crowd carries the picture of our Umbrian Saint amidst warrior tribal dances, drums and ululations; in France two ancient monasteries join for a delicate, artistic celebration of modern contemplative life . . . We are still waiting to hear from the Far East, the Philippines and other lands where Clare's 'little plants' have multiplied. But is all this diversity any deeper than the language and the music, any more lasting than the occasional feast? Paul VI told the bishops of Uganda that they should 'make Christ African'. Do we make Clare a Japanese, a Mexican, a Zairean nun? We should perhaps answer that the pursuit of this ideal is rare and difficult, though an empirical adaptation to cultures is practised to some extent almost everywhere.

An awareness of the existence and importance of different cultures is a recent progress of human thought built on the new sciences of ethnology, anthropology etc. The Church is usually not ahead in such developments in spite of a few persecuted pioneers. There may be also an indifference to changing circumstances which comes from the nature of contemplative life. Clare herself writes: 'Place your mind before the mirror of eternity; place your soul in the brilliance of glory and transform your whole being into the image of the Godhead Himself'. Here we touch the essence of contemplative life. The Augustinian tradition sees it as the sabbath on earth, the beginning of the eternal

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worship, a life which, at least at its summit, anticipates eternity. And as for the terrestrial circumstances, are they not reduced to insignificance by Franciscan austerity and the confinement of a cloister? Clare loves the symbol of the mirror. On its polished surface she sees Christ, poor and crucified, and she sees herself, barefoot servant of the Lord, raising her hands in self-offering or still in deep adoration. The Poor Clares of all times and places can recognize themselves in this picture. They 'wither and fade' only when an abundance of riches or concerns stifles the life of the Spirit in them, and they survive wherever silence for the Word of God and a little food and water for their scant physical needs may be obtained. Why then bother about the socio-historical environment?

The answer of course is that each generation of Clares is shaped by such conditions and no formation can take the risk of ignoring it. Besides, mere survival is hardly the kind of life that Jesus came to share with us and give 'to the full' through his own incarnation in the culture and time that the Father chose for him. When we look at Clare we see that her monastic pattern of living, her austere poverty and her total commitment to Christ have left intact her own personality and culture. In the letter she wrote to Agnes of Prague at the end of her life she is still obviously a refined lady of Umbria in knightly times. This preserves her truth, authenticity and wholeness. Why then could not the same vocation and style of life keep sprouting from Eastern, African or American roots as well as respecting the modern mentality of contemporary nuns?

The first difficulty is that in the very heart of the young women who knock at the door of a monastery, at least in the Third World, these two realities, their own family or tribal traditions and their modern upbringing, mixed in very varied proportions, are already in conflict – and unfortunately most of those who receive these women are either unaware of the importance of inculturation or instinctively opposed to most of its forms. A postulant from a rural area, for instance, may be used to always bowing to her parents with a light hand-clapping before addressing them; she will act in the same way when approaching her superior. If this sister is a western abbess of traditional convictions she will soon replace this sign of respect by those she is used to: kneeling down or saying some formula. If her mentality is more modern she may be more aware of the value of local forms of expression but unwilling to receive any sign of particular respect simply because of her function. The outcome will be the same: the custom will be banned. The postulant will not defend the still living language of her culture because she is in a

situation of dependence and because she is already divided, having been subjected to contradictory influences at home and at school.

There are three aspects of Poor Clare life which inculturation should influence: prayer, community life and communication with others. In all three cases there are difficulties arising from the social change taking place almost everywhere and, of course, from specific local problems. In the secondary schools and colleges of India, Africa or South America it is English, French, Spanish or Portuguese, not the local languages, which are the vehicles of education and often the only unifying tongue of the new nations. Monasteries have a difficult choice to make. They cannot have an inculturated, living, creative liturgy, with the riches of deeply meaningful and moving symbolism, dances, music and related arts without using the local vernacular. However, they must often use a former colonial power's language for the formation of the young sisters, for most exchanges within the community and with outsiders like priests, as well as for spiritual reading. It is complex and unsatisfactory. Not to use the local language and local traditions is to renounce inculturation, with serious spiritual and psychological consequences; but not to use an international language is to renounce access to a multitude of Christian sources and to a whole range of intellectual resources. The problem is of great consequence for the present and the future of a monastery, as well as for its influence on the Church and its liturgy in each country.

It has been observed that monasteries should neither become museums of dead traditions nor follow the rapidly changing fashions of successive generations. In fact most of them, as far as liturgy is concerned, follow lamely the forms of prayer used in the parishes of their country. We do not find Poor Clare ashrams in India. Except in some countries of Africa and Madagascar, the only signs of interest in inculturation are a timid use of local instruments, an occasional new symbol, an 'ikabana' on the altar or some batik material on the wall. The exceptions, however, show what a creative liturgy can do for the vitality of the Church when it takes into account the sensitivities and beliefs of the people who are praying and their own forms of expression. It attracts people and spreads like good news. It is one of the best means of evangelization and may stop the multiplication of sects.

Unfortunately even when meaningful traditions are still living or easy to revive and there is a community of Clares both creative and discerning, the effort of the sisters is in vain without the encouragement or at least the silent sympathy of bishops and priests. No Poor Clare speaks of making hosts with millet, but why object to flour with scented herbs to replace incense, to vesting the priest in red for Easter where red

is the symbol of life and white of death, or to inviting the spirits of the ancestors to the celebrations? Some Clares made a ceremonial cap like those worn by the chiefs of the region for their bishop. It had nothing extravagant in shape or material and the bishop found it much more beautiful and dignified than the ordinary mitre, but the nuns were 'reported' to the Nuncio and the Congregation for Rites investigated this breach of ritual! Prelates' time might be more usefully spent in giving a solid liturgical formation to the nuns of the Third World and allowing monasteries to make wise experiments in inculturation which will benefit the whole Church.

Contemplatives of the southern hemisphere may also restore the sense of awe and deep reverence that the West has lost and that so many people miss in modern forms of worship. Among the Poor Clares of Africa who have tried to remain rooted in their ethnic traditions while expressing their Christian faith, we see and feel the sense of celebration which makes feasts so truly 'festive' in the variety of songs, the joy of dancing, the vibrations of drums and colours; but their liturgies inspire also a sense of the sacred through the respect given to persons and places of worship and through the sensitivity to the numinous and the divine presence. This may give birth to new eucharistic forms of worship, since the eucharist has always been the life-centre of a Poor Clare monastery.

The second pole of their life is the community itself, a human and divine reality, shaped by the liturgy but extending far beyond. The communal sense, always strong in Franciscan tradition, it lost some of its importance when modern individualists filled our novitiates, but it is still very alive in most of the Third World. In this respect also Poor Clare monasteries can try to be 'mirrors and models' of Christian communities. Even in feudal times Clare, the first woman to write a Rule approved by the Church, organized a remarkable 'balance of powers' in each monastery, the role of the abbess being very central but balanced by the authority of the chapter: all members of the community having to be consulted, besides the council, in all important decisions. Modern western people practise 'democracy' by following the rule of the majority, sometimes perhaps with a faith that blinds them to its injustice and possible divisive effects. Most other peoples, if they have not studied under Harvard, Oxford or Paris graduates, will favour the palaver ritual. The chapter is closer to the latter. Important matters are discussed until a consensus is reached by a process of mutual concessions; There is a prayerful search for common ground which leaves no one out and often obtains solutions wiser and more comprehensive than a computerized 'Yes' and 'No' ever could. If, then, 'the Lord reveals to

the least and smallest what is the best', her voice is heard and may shape, along with other opinions, the final result. To obtain a consensus may take some time, but wisdom and unity have to be priced high. Obviously matters of less importance should be left to the competence of the few – again a principle more acceptable in traditional societies than among those who prefer full individual independence to social harmony.

The common life, the sharing of everything, is essential to this harmony in monasteries and a very important aspect and consequence of the vow of poverty. Among nuns who are almost universally called 'Poor Clares' and whose founders insisted so much on 'having nothing under the skies' in order to follow the poor Christ, we may expect a certain uniformity in the realization of this evangelical ideal. But nowhere are the differences greater. Here you may have a microwave oven in the kitchen but there the sisters collect firewood to cook their food. In an American monastery you may find (not in individual cells but in the general office) a fax machine, a copier or a computer, while in Bangalore or Zambia a typewriter which does not fall to pieces is a treasure. Vacuum cleaners run along the corridors of one Poor Clare house, while on the other side of the world makeshift brooms are made with grass to clean another Poor Clare house because true brooms are too expensive . . . It is mostly a question of environment. In a country where artificial lights remove any difference between night and day and wax can be bought everywhere, the sisters will find it normal to light twelve candles when they expose the Blessed Sacrament; if they know that at home their young brothers and sisters cannot study for lack of a small lamp or one candle, they will hesitate to light any at all. Of course some monasteries with more resources help others, but each house is independent and communication is less than easy. The curious thing is that often the sisters who live in the strictest poverty will be those who will question their life-style in comparison with the greater suffering and insecurity of many – perhaps because this misery is knocking at their very door at all times, and is ruining their own families.

For the same reason the need of sharing is painfully experienced, and so is the 'distance' that our enclosed life makes even greater between us and those we want to help. Even here circumstances are wide apart. A French nun wrote that she was tempted to go and do something for her impoverished family when her father lost his job, but none of them was starving. What could the young sister feel whose mother said during the recent sub-Saharan drought: 'Now the closest well with some water is many miles away and often I cannot go there. I am too weak as I have so little to eat'? Still, poverty is not relative only in economic terms. It is a

spiritual reality and has many forms. The hands who hold the vacuum cleaner may be old and trembling while those who gather dust with the help of some grass are strong and young – and those who visit even those monasteries where life does not look very hard may be moved to see the joyful serenity of invalid Poor Clare sisters from whom illness has taken all kinds of comfort or ‘riches’, even sight or movement, but who continue to sing what was in fact the song of their whole life, the song of this ‘*God-centred poverty*’ who gives the kingdom of heaven to those who embrace her’ (First Letter of Clare to Agnes).

There are many ways to find this joy; different values appear important in different cultures. As Poor Clare foundations multiply everywhere – in the former communist world of Eastern Europe, in South America or Africa, or as far north as Norway – the gospel life, the prayer life of St Clare will shine on many facets of human life. St Bonaventure said of Clare that ‘she was schooled by the Holy Spirit’ and so is her Order. Inculturation is a sign of the freedom of the Spirit; it drives roots in each soil for taller and more fruitful trees, and the diversity of flowers and fruits gladdens the whole Church of Christ.