

# CLARE'S PRAYER AS A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

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THERE CAN HARDLY BE 'a higher evaluation of being human than that it is to be an open question, a never ending question, a vast hunger, a craving for God', as the Dutch poet Willem Barnard has said. Clare of Assisi risked her life on this high esteem of being human. This risky enterprise was, in fact, the reality of the poverty which she embraced. She lived in a constant insecurity about daily needs and about her health and it was under these circumstances she learned to know the generosity of the Most High God. Her way of life was an 'open question' for him to whom she had committed herself heart and soul. Drawn by the One 'who gave himself totally for her love' (cf the Third Letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague 15), she followed the path of an ever-intensifying surrender, which made her grow more and more like her Beloved.<sup>2</sup> Her attentive contemplation of Christ's poverty and lowliness gave her a high esteem for human nature. She expresses this in her Third Letter to Agnes, the princess of Bohemia who founded a convent for Poor Ladies in Prague:

The soul of a faithful person, the most worthy of all creatures because of the grace of God, is greater than heaven itself, since the heavens and the rest of the creation cannot contain their Creator and only the faithful soul is his dwelling place and throne. (3 Agnes 21-22)

## *Prayer in Clare's writings*

How did Clare live out this longing for God and his boundless love? How was she able to fulfil and complete her humanity? In her writings Clare maps out a short road: 'Gaze upon him, consider him, contemplate him as you desire to imitate him' (2 Agnes 20). Her sisters tell us: 'She was assiduous in prayer and contemplation. When she returned from prayer, her face appeared clearer and more beautiful than the sun. Her prayers sent forth an indescribable sweetness so her life seemed totally heavenly' (Process of Canonization 4:4). She herself became prayer, as it were: the total response to God's longing for us.

Surprising though it is, we find no concrete directions about prayer in Clare's writings except that she mentions the Office in her Rule. This

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prayer was indeed the heart-beat and breath of life of the San Damiano community. There were no special times in the horarium for what we now call meditation. Clare's phrase, 'the spirit of holy prayer and devotion', indicates that prayer and life flowed into each other. The rhythm of the Office and simple work guaranteed the flowering of the sisters' longing for 'the Spirit of the Lord and his holy manner of working'. Gratitude for her call also permeates the Testament which, together with her Rule, Clare wrote right at the end of her life. In the Testament, she stresses that her sisters will express their gratitude best when they see the life given them each day as a gift from the generous God. Her own deep bond with Christ also breathes through her letters to Agnes of Prague. These letters, written for a specific situation, clearly display that Christ was her motive force. In these letters, she indirectly reveals her own personal prayer. In the Fourth Letter, written as she neared death, Clare develops the idea of the mirror. Apparently images dealing with 'light' and 'looking' had a special appeal for her. When she remembered the beginning of her call, she expressed that experience as an enlightenment of her heart (cf Rule 6:1). In this light 'whose remembrance delightfully shines' (4 Agnes 12) her life was filled with meaning and structure. She phrased this for Agnes in a very touching manner. Agnes probably had told her that she had lost her way and this is how Clare responds:

Place your mind before the mirror of eternity! Place your soul in the brilliance of glory! Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance! And transform your entire being into the image of the Godhead Itself through contemplation. (3 Agnes 12–13)

In the enclosure of San Damiano, Clare opened like a flower to the beauty of her Beloved (cf 2 Agnes 20; 4 Agnes 10), the source of all beauty. She admired this beauty in all creation: 'She reminded her sisters to 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 peoples and creatures (Process of Canonization 14:9). She marvelled at the shining sun and the light of the moon and stars (cf 2 Agnes 5; 3 Agnes 16). Her vocabulary shows a delicate sensitivity to and awareness of created reality.

*The process of looking at Christ*

Though – as we have already said – Clare did not write a treatise on prayer we can, nevertheless, trace her way of praying in her letters. In her Second and in her Fourth Letters where she treats of contemplating Christ she uses a similar sequence of verbs.

## 2 Agnes 19–20

to look (*videre*)to gaze (*intueri*)to consider (*considerare*)to contemplate (*contemplari*)

## 4 Agnes 15–23

to gaze (*intueri*)to reflect on (*speculari*)to look, pay attention (*attendere*)to consider (*considerare*)to contemplate (*contemplari*)

In both series there is a visible movement from *the outside to the inside*. Clare describes a process by which contemplation is internalized: the praying person is touched by something, she observes, and as the gaze intensifies so the inner involvement is increased. Our surrender to that at which we gaze develops. The growing intensity of this gazing results in a heartfelt contemplation and this, in its turn, initiates a returning dynamic from *the inside to the outside*. In the Second Letter the contemplation of Christ provokes a fervent longing to follow him: 'Look always to the Beginning', who is the 'Spouse, more beautiful than the children of men. Look upon him and follow him' (11; 19). In the Fourth Letter this longing grows into a total union with the Crucified. It is clear that Clare is telling us about her own path to contemplation through these well thought out distinctions between the different ways of looking.

*The path to contemplation*

In the Third Letter Clare writes about the 'incomparable treasure hidden in the field of the world and of the human heart'. As long as we have no awareness of this 'treasure', we remain unsatisfied and restlessly try to discover this secret of our existence. In our time, humanity is crying out for the greatest possible self-fulfilment, trying earnestly to find answers to questions like: where do I come from? who am I? where am I go to? In Clare's advice to Agnes we recognize this same act of searching for the 'treasure' which lies hidden within us and which yet surrounds us. Clare uses three concepts: 'remembrance', 'mirror' and 'desire'. Remembrance takes us back to the Source; the mirror both mediates an image and offers a model; desire reaches towards its goal. This triad forms the curve of her dynamic spiritual journey.

The process of praying, as described by Clare in her Fourth Letter, is related to *lectio divina* or prayerful Scripture-reading, a method of prayer which was quite common in Clare's day. There are four stages in the process:

1. *Lectio* or reading, by which the object of attention is led from *the outside to the inside* (15–17). In Clare's time, when there were only a few books available and not everyone could read, *reading* also meant listening to someone else reading or else looking at a picture.

2. *Meditatio* or meditation. Clare develops this by the way she invites Agnes to look in the mirror (18–23).

3. *Oratio* or prayer. In this letter the prayer is the conversation with Christ (24–27).

4. *Contemplatio* or contemplation. This is seen as the fulfilment of *lectio divina* (28–34).<sup>3</sup> This method of prayer is connected to the classical division of the spiritual ways: the purgative, illuminative and unitive ways.

### 1 *Find his presence*

Gaze upon that mirror each day, O Queen and Spouse of Jesus Christ, and continually reflect your face on it [my translation], that you may adorn yourself within and without with beautiful robes, covered, as is becoming the daughter and most chaste bride of the Most High King, with the flowers and garments of all the virtues. Indeed, blessed poverty, holy humility, and inexpressible charity are reflected in that mirror, as, with the grace of God, you can contemplate them throughout the entire mirror. (4 Agnes 15–18)

This passage echoes the biblical invitation: Seek the face of the Lord, come before his presence. Clare writes: 'Gaze upon that mirror and reflect your face on it'. The essence of 'gazing' is to watch someone or something with heart and soul in order to be touched by them. This 'gaze' corresponds to the first phase of *lectio* or reading and is mainly emphasized during the purgative phase.

It is certainly no accident that the first injunction to watch is immediately followed by a personal word to Agnes. The first purpose of looking and reflecting concerns the one who looks in the mirror: 'your face'. Agnes must first recognize her own identity as 'spouse' and 'queen'. This awareness will motivate her to make herself beautiful for Christ. She must use the Spouse's beauty as a mirror; she is the heavenly Jerusalem, 'the splendour of eternal glory, the brilliance of eternal light and the mirror without blemish' (4 Agnes 14); she must make herself beautiful for her Beloved.

Clare encourages us to be active. If God were to adorn us without our help, our identity would not fully mature. We would be like a statue, decorated by someone else (Philo). The heart of the matter is to do away with everything which prevents our gaze from going deeper. God can only partly do this for us, since in the purgative phase our co-operation with grace is indispensable. God will do nothing without us. He respects our 'liberty as the children of God' (Rom 8:21). 'Reflect your face': this

act of reflection leads to real self-knowledge. In so far as he reveals himself, we discover in him the features of the one in whose image we too were formed. Everybody contains traces of their Creator in their 'remembrance'. Looking creates resemblance. Perhaps we are insufficiently aware of how much our culture of 'watching' influences the patterns of our living. We are overwhelmed in our daily life by *mirrors*: advertising, fashion, television, literature in abundance. The risk that we shall be caught in a self-alienating reflection and imitation is far from imaginary. Certainly phases of reflecting others are indispensable during our growth towards adulthood. Yet it seems to be important that in answering the question about which mirrors we choose to look into, we should make some clear distinctions. Using a mirror which reveals us in the best light is very helpful in becoming who we fundamentally are, namely an 'image of his beloved Son according to the body and a likeness according to the Spirit' (cf Francis' Admonition 5:1). Clare also touches this deep desire we have to focus our heart and soul on Christ. In the radiance of Christ's poverty and his lowliness we grow towards a knowledge of ourselves as poor and needy (cf 1 Agnes 20). This *purifying* revelation frees us from alienating self-images. It is necessary to look into this mirror 'each day' and 'continually' and to reflect on ourselves inwardly and outwardly, so that the very acts of looking and reflecting can lead to a transformation of the whole self. The whole of our humanity, all our senses, emotions and mind must be involved in this process. Only in this way can the reflecting person discern in the radiance of the One his or her inner fragmentation and incompleteness. This can be shocking. Nevertheless, just such an honest recognition can awaken a slumbering desire to become one with Christ. He too desires our healing. In this reflection events from our life, sad or cheerful, find their proper place. Our broken self-image will then be healed. The etching of Christ's image becomes more clearly visible. As a Mirror Christ makes himself known as the One who completes what is lacking in us. The desire more and more to imitate him provides the incentive to follow him. This is what Clare indicated in her Second Letter: 'Gaze upon him . . . and follow him'.

## 2 *Journeying with him*

The second phase of the *lectio divina*, *meditatio*, partly coincides with the second phase of the spiritual way: the illuminative phase. Clare develops the *meditatio* by a triple invitation to place ourselves in the radiance of the Mirror. Then our greater resemblance to him can no longer be delayed. She offers three successive modes of looking: 'Look at the beginning

(*principium*) of the mirror, that is, the poverty'; at the centre (*medium*): 'Consider the holy humility, the blessed poverty'; at the end (*finis*) 'Contemplate the ineffable charity'. The repeated urging to look into the mirror aims at an interiorization of every stage of Christ's life. This process shows similarities with a meditation based on the imagination:

Look at the border of this mirror, that is, the poverty of him who was placed in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes. O marvellous humility! O astonishing poverty! The King of angels, the Lord of heaven and earth, is laid in a manger! (4 Agnes 19–20)

Look; pay attention to the beginning; remain in careful and exclusive concentration on the poverty of this Child in the crib, so that he may again make us aware of who we originally are. In this light we learn to accept ourselves. The deeper look suddenly expands into astonishment, which then opens into awareness: 'O marvellous humility! O astonishing poverty!' This shock makes the paradox of his poverty transparent: the Generous One becomes as needy as a baby. In the beginning the mirror reveals itself as an icon of God's poverty.

When, as your attention grows, you are touched emotionally, you then begin praying. Only a heart purified in prayer can receive the secret of God made man. This secret will guide you in your own development as a human being.

Consider him. (2 Agnes 20)

Then, at the surface of the mirror, consider the holy humility, the blessed poverty, the untold labours and burdens that he endured for the redemption of the whole human race. (4 Agnes 22)

Every time Clare uses the word 'consider', she gratefully remembers and ponders on what was good in her own and in other people's lives. 'We can consider in this the abundant kindness of God to us', she writes in her Testament, and then explains, with wonder, how much she and her sisters have received from the Merciful One through Francis (cf Testament 15–17). In the same way she considers the life of the Son of God.

Consider, look, as you would admire a starry sky. Thanks to the expansion of the view, the meditating person can now look at a broader field. Thus we can consider Jesus' entire life in the centre of the mirror, where the brightest reflection is visible. At the centre of Clare's contemplation the way of the pilgrim is seen, as he lived 'in the midst of the earth' (cf Francis' Office of the Passion 7:3) in poverty and lowliness: he had 'nowhere to lay his head' (1 Agnes 18). Consider all his labours to

free us from our burdens. In the centre of the mirror we find the One who bears and endures. By pondering on this model, we absorb it into our hearts. We are encouraged to follow him. This is how we become a mirror and a model for others, who in their turn will also be mirrors to others (Testament 19–21).

Contemplate him as you desire to imitate him. (2 Agnes 20)

Then, in the depth of this same mirror, contemplate the ineffable charity that led him to suffer on the wood of the Cross and die there the most shameful kind of death. (4 Agnes 19–23)

Again, looking stimulates us. Eventually the mirror again reveals itself as an icon. Now it reflects the 'ineffable charity' through which he chose total self-emptying. It is a love which does not hesitate to be overwhelmed by scandal and scorn.

Clare links 'contemplate' with 'ineffable charity'. We hear an echo of Jesus' own words: 'Dwell in my love' (Jn 15:9). 'Con'-templation for Clare always involves being 'with': dwell in him, stay with him. In the Second Letter too, the word 'contemplate' is immediately followed by 'if you suffer with him, weep with him, die with him' (cf 2 Agnes 21). By linking the word 'contemplate' with the secret of the cross, she alludes to the possibility of contemplation being a dark experience of fierce suffering, an experience of having to die. The unitive phase is already being announced here. During this phase the question asked is whether one is prepared to live through the inescapable. It can be done in the strength of love, and it must be done for the sake of the Beloved. At this point in the process one arrives at the limits of one's personal capacities and becomes – often powerlessly – speechless.

Therefore, that Mirror, suspended on the wood of the Cross, urged those who passed by to consider, saying: 'All you who pass by the way, look and see if there is any suffering like my suffering!' Let us respond with one voice, with one spirit, to him crying and grieving Who said: 'Remembering this over and over leaves my soul downcast within me!' From this moment, then, O Queen of our heavenly King, let yourself be inflamed more strongly with the fervour of charity. (4 Agnes 24–27)

This part accords with the third phase of the *lectio divina*: *oratio* or prayer. Now the three hinge-words occur together: 'mirror', 'remembrance' and 'desire'. A strong and dynamic wave unfolds which carries forward the real process of transfiguration. To have started on the road towards contemplation was an effort of our own will, but in

contemplation itself the Holy Spirit guides us to surrender to the Father in imitation of Jesus. The meditating person reaches stillness. In this stillness the Mirror itself speaks. The Scorned One longs for recognition. He cries to be seen: 'Look and see'. Clare's moving and compassionate answer is to quote Lamentations 3:20 in the Vulgate, and stresses memory: *memoria memor ero*. Remembrance forms the space in which the Spirit arouses our desire to become one with the Mirror. With the help of remembrance, in the summit of the spirit, we can find God's hidden presence at any moment (Augustine), as is the case here. By remembering the image of the Beloved again and again, it becomes etched in the memory. More and more the lover longs to be like him. She prays to be able to lose herself: 'Leave my soul downcast within me'. This process can be understood as a profound emptying in which our inner core is exposed and renewed in the likeness of Christ. 'Die with him on the cross of tribulation' (2 Agnes 21) is Clare's description of this extremely painful experience during the phase of *unification*. However, the fear of losing herself is extinguished by 'the fervour of charity'. This emptying is the only answer to our longing for a return of love from the 'ineffable charity'. When someone has been purified so intensely, the Beloved is experienced as the one 'whose affection excites, whose contemplation refreshes, whose kindness fulfils, whose delight replenishes' (4 Agnes 11-12). We no longer live by our own strength, but the Spirit of Christ, 'whose remembrance delightfully shines' (4 Agnes 12), works in us.

### 3 *Coming home to him*

This part corresponds to the final phase of the *lectio divina*, *contemplatio*, and to the completion of the spiritual way: union.

As you further contemplate his ineffable delights, eternal riches and honours, and sigh for them in the great desire and love of your heart, may you cry out: Draw me after you, we will run in the fragrance of your perfumes, O heavenly Spouse! I will run and not tire, until You bring me into the wine-cellar, until Your left hand is under my head and Your right hand will embrace me happily, [and] You will kiss me with the happiest kiss of Your mouth. (4 Agnes 28-32)

Urged forward by this desire, the imitation of Christ has become attractive. Poverty, humiliation and the tribulation of love are felt as 'riches', 'honours' and 'ineffable delights'. The 'fragrance of his perfumes' is so irresistible that the bride (that is, the one who has been remade in Christ) cannot but follow him. The 'great desire and love' call for fulfilment: 'Draw me after you . . . I will run and not tire'. She begs

to be drawn beyond her limitations and allowed to enter the place of contemplation. The attitude of reaching out now leads her into the wine-cellar, there to surrender to the arms of the Bridegroom. The summit of contemplation is described as the entry into a *new place of refuge*. After living through the experience of her poverty, she who journeyed with him in the strength of love 'feels what his friends feel as they taste the hidden sweetness that God himself has reserved from the beginning for those who love him' (3 Agnes 14).

Looking, listening, smelling, tasting and feeling all meet through contemplation in the experience of union with the Beloved. In the completion of the contemplation, his image in us is healed. We receive our true identity: identification with Christ.

In this contemplation, may you remember your poor little mother, knowing that I have inscribed the happy remembrance [my translation] of you on the tablets of my heart, holding you dearer than all the others.  
(4 Agnes 33-34)

'In this contemplation': Clare experienced contemplation as the place of God's love. In the security of this love, we become beneficial to others: 'May you remember'. Again the word 'remembrance' emanates, twice, from Clare's quill. This repetition reflects him, 'whose remembrance delightfully shines' (4 Agnes 12). In this way Clare informs us that we can only be truly human if we radiate Christ's love to others. This means that we, bearing God's loving image, recognize and respect that same image in the people we meet on our journey. It is together with others that we become human. We are given sisters and brothers. They reflect Christ's countenance for us as we do for them.

### *Clare's contemplation*

From the description which Clare, in her farewell words, gives to her soul-friend, it has become clear that the person of the poor and lowly Jesus plays an important part in the process of looking at Christ in the mirror.

Loving and wondering attention for him arouses the desire to become one with him in his utter self-emptying. His poverty, lowliness and especially the unutterable love with which he gave himself so completely, moved and inspired Clare again and again. That is probably why she, like Francis, laid her main stress on becoming thoroughly human, following the example of the Son of God. He completely lived our humanity and our fragility, and he treasured it. He freely shared our deepest nature: namely the fact that, filled with needs and longings as we

are, yet we can share in God's generous Being. In Christ we meet God as a poor man: an '*open question*' for love, justice and truth. It is in the commitment of our lives that we, too, become icons of him, who longs beyond measure. Thus we respond to love with love. Clare's final response to this was : 'O Lord, may You Who have created me, be blessed' (Process of Canonization 3:20).

In her treatment of her spiritual journey Clare makes no mention of asceticism. It was love which inspired her. She did not write as a teacher but rather as an encouraging sister. Since she was so practical, she – so to speak – took her spiritual journey not on a slow train but on an intercity one: 'Look at him and follow him'. She reduced her life to this radical simplicity. This gave her that deep joy by which she radiated such strength. Clare trod her spiritual way well aware that the infinitely loving and generous God was himself travelling with her. So her deepest wish is: 'May you totally love him, who gave himself totally for your love' (3 Agnes 15).

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I thank Aline Looman-Graaskamp and Sr Frances Teresa OSC for their translation.

<sup>2</sup> Latin texts from: M.-F. Becker, J.-F. Godet, Th. Matura (eds), *Claire d'Assise, écrits: introduction, texte latin, traduction, notes et index*, Sources Chrétiennes, 325 (Paris, 1985). Quotations from: R. J. Armstrong OFM Cap (ed and trans), *Clare of Assisi: early documents* (New Jersey, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Cf Guigo II, *Epistola de vita contemplativa* (Sources Chrétiennes, vol 163); William of Saint Thierry, *Epistola ad fratres de Monte-Dei* (Sources Chrétiennes, vol 223, nos 120–124); E. van den Goorbergh and Th. Zwerman, *Clara van Assisi: Licht vanuit de verborgenheid. Over haar brieven aan Agnes van Praag* (Assen, 1994), pp 144–151.