



Reflection for the Feast of St. Clare
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“Si Dios quiere” is a common phrase in Latin America. It literally means “if God wants” or “if it is God’s will.” When I first encountered the phrase in El Salvador, I found it quite frustrating. I might ask someone if he or she was planning to attend the catechist meeting that was scheduled for the weekend. Most likely the response would be: “Si Dios quiere.” I thought that was very noncommittal. I wanted a YES or a NO. Now my awareness leads me to believe that an attitude of “Si Dios quiere” could enhance the lives of all of us. How much saner our lives would be if we are able to accept that we are not God but created by God out of nothing. “Poverty is rooted in our creaturehood in that we are not equal to God. It means radical dependency since we come from another and are dependent on another for the very existence of life.” (Ilia Delio)

Today we celebrate the life and spirit of Clare of Assisi who spent much of her life struggling to obtain from the church the “privilege of poverty” for herself and her sisters. Clare began to fight for this privilege in 1216, when she wrote to Pope Innocent III and requested formal exemption from the requirement that monastic houses possess sufficient corporate property and goods to support their needs. For a group of enclosed women to follow vows of strict poverty was almost unthinkable. Without property, the sisters would have to support themselves through the same kind of labor performed by poor women in the cities and by begging for alms. The privilege of poverty would also make strict enclosure impossible. In that way Clare’s community would not be pushed out of their ministerial work among the poor.

Through the years Clare continued to struggle for the privilege of poverty. Finally in 1253 it looked like Clare might die before her rule was approved. However, moved by Clare’s determination and fidelity, Innocent IV finally approved the Rule of Clare. He rushed the process through the curia, because he wanted her to know that she had secured the privilege before she died.

Clare grasped the truth of Paul’s message to the Corinthians that we just heard: “This treasure we possess in earthen vessels to make it clear that its surpassing power comes from God and not from us.” Our eyes are focused on God and not ourselves. Poverty is not so much about want or need. It is not about being totally concerned with having little or nothing. It is all about relationship. Poverty impels us to reflect on our lives in the world from the position of weakness, dependency and vulnerability. Poverty calls us to be open and receptive to others, to allow others into our lives and to be free enough to enter the lives of others.

To be a truly human person is to be poor. The poverty of the human person is not only an economic poverty, rather the poverty of being human. Ilia Delio claims that “poverty means that human life, from birth to death, hangs on the threads of God’s gracious love.” In the spirit of Francis and Clare we are aware that all is gift of our generous God. In the message of today’s gospel, we find this dependency expressed in strong words: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who live in me and I in them will produce abundantly, for apart from me you can do nothing.” Clare who came from a life of wealth and privilege knew in the deepest part of her heart that having God’s love was everything. She was willing to live on God’s love and nothing more.

This mystery is captured in a Zen story:

Ryokan, a Zen master, lived the simplest kind of life in a little hut at the foot of the mountain. One evening a thief visited the hut only to discover that there was nothing there to steal. Ryokan returned and discovered him in the act. “You have come a long way to visit me,” he told the prowler, “and you should not return empty-handed. Please take my clothes as a gift.” The thief was bewildered. He took the clothes and slunk away. “Poor fellow,” Ryokan mused, “I wish I could give him the beautiful moon.”

In her small, quiet way, Clare believed that women were co-workers with the men of the church, just as Jesus depended on the ministry of the women in the early church. She believed that women could equally embrace deprivation, poverty, hard work, trial, and the contempt of the world. Clare was able to convince Francis and his followers that by their desire to protect women from hardship and poverty they were also limiting their ability to follow in the footsteps of Christ. Clare knew that living in poverty would give her a freedom that she had not experienced before her conversion. She wished to come to God with an unencumbered heart.

“What else have I in heaven but you? Apart from you I want nothing on earth.
My heart leaps for joy, for you O God, are my portion forever.” (Ps. 73)

The very meaning of Clare’s name signifies light and clarity. Clare was the fire of love that burned brightly in her cloister. She reflected on the life of Christ in order to see her own strengths and weaknesses and to help us to understand that Christ took on human flesh, not to suffer and die for us, but to show us a love beyond understanding. Clare was truly a mystic, consumed by a single passion that identifies her with Christ. Everything else is relative as she seeks the center of her life.

“God let light shine in Clare’s heart
that she in turn might make known
the glory of God shining on the face of Jesus.” (2 Cor. 4)

Invitation for renewal of vows.