

# CONTEMPLATION

## “Stirrings of the Spirit”

### The Incarnational Prayer of Clare of Assisi

--Clare D'Auria, OSF

*This article is reproduced from The Cord, 56.6 (2006).  
Used with permission.*

**(Level 3 – Advanced)**



## INTRODUCTION

One of the core values of the Franciscan Charism is “contemplation.” Prayer is a way of life for followers of Francis and Clare. Our saints were so filled with God that adoration flowed freely from the depths of their inner lives. This is the holiness to which we are called.

The purpose of all Franciscan prayer is to give God ceaseless praise and thanksgiving for all that God has done and continues to do in creation and in our re-creation in Christ.

--Adapted from Margaret Carney, OSF, and Thaddeus Horgan, SA, The Rule and Life of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis and Commentary, (Washington, D.C., Franciscan Federation, 1997), pp. 45-47.

***Suggestion for use: a three-hour session, with one 15 minute break  
or two 1 ½ hour sessions***

***Note: This article could be used as a reflection/retreat experience.***

***Goal: to grow in an understanding of prayer in the life of Clare,  
and thus deepen the value of prayer in our own lives.***

## **“Stirrings of the Spirit”**

### **The Incarnational Prayer of Clare of Assisi**

*--Clare D’Auria, OSF*

As I began to pray and reflect on the heart of Clare as I have come to know her over the years, the opening lines from a poem by Carmelite poet and mystic, Jessica Powers, came back to me:

#### **“To Live with the Spirit”**

To live with the Spirit of God is to be a listener,  
It is to keep the vigil of mystery,  
earthless and still.  
One leans to catch the stirrings of the Spirit,  
strange as the wind’s will.”<sup>(1)</sup> —*Jessica Powers*

*Pause / Reflect --- Share: what do these five lines say to you?*

In these five brief lines, the poet captures the soul of contemplative prayer and the heart of Clare of Assisi. Attentive to the “stirrings” of the Spirit of God as she hovers over the sometimes chaotic waters of all that is created, Clare looks and listens for the Word that will inevitably speak to her of the mystery of Incarnation: the mystery of the poverty of the God who took flesh and became fully human in Jesus Christ. And once she discovers the truth of this mystery on Palm Sunday, 1212, she commits her life to “keep...vigil” at the foot of the cross of this “strange mystery”: to “gaze, consider, contemplate” so that she might “imitate her Spouse.”<sup>(2)</sup>

#### **Incarnational Prayer: “The Poor Crucified” Christ**

Last March, a segment on CBS’ “60 Minutes” stirred something unmistakable in me on the evening I first watched it.<sup>(3)</sup> Since viewing it, I have prayed with it many times, so much so that it has become a kind of allegory for me that illuminates the invitation and the demands, the call and the conversion which are inherent in one’s choosing to be faithful to a contemplative way of life.

The interview featured a community of sea gypsies called the Moken. Among the least touched by modern civilization, they’ve lived for hundreds of years on the islands off the coast of Thailand and Burma. Although they live precisely where the devastating tsunami of 2004 hit the hardest, they suffered no casualties at all because as people who are born on the sea, live on the sea, and die on the sea, they know how to read the signs of the sea. And, as interviewer Bob Simon notes, “It was their intimacy with the sea that saved them.”

On December 26, the day the tsunami hit, Saleh Kalathalay, a skilled spear-fisherman, noticed that a strange silence had come over the waters. Then, he told Simon, “The water receded very fast and one wave, one small wave, came – and I knew – this is not ordinary.” He began to run around warning others, but few believed him. So he brought the skeptics to the water’s edge where they too saw the signs from the sea. Eventually everyone, the Moken and the tourists, listened to the warnings from the sea, climbed to higher ground, and were saved. Their village, however, was completely destroyed. Later in the interview, Saleh was asked why he knew something was wrong, and the Burmese commercial fishermen, also at sea at the time the tsunami hit, did not. Saleh replied, “They were too busy collecting squid. They were not really looking at anything. They saw nothing, they looked at nothing. They don’t know how to look. They were too busy collecting squid.”

*Pause / Reflect --- Share: What do Saleh's words speak to our culture, -- to my/your lifestyle?*

Clare of Assisi knew “how to look” and “how to read the signs” of her times written on the hillsides of Mount Subasio where the small and walled town of Assisi is nestled in the Umbrian Valley about halfway between the cities of Perugia and Foligno, ninety miles north of Rome. As she stood with her townspeople on the brink of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Clare also stood apart from them because she knew how to “listen” to the “strange silence”: to that paradoxical voice of God that rumbled quietly beneath the noise and clang (*cf. 1Cor 13:1*) of warring factions and clashing feudal classes fighting for their lives in a political and social system headed toward extinction.

Unlike those among the nobility who stood at the “edge” of the impending disaster but failed to see what was coming, and unlike those among the rising merchant class who were “too busy” taking advantage of such pervasive societal upheaval to either “look” or “listen,” Clare knew how to pay attention to the “stirrings” made by the “one small wave” that was “the Poor Crucified” Christ (*1Lag,13*) incarnated in the countless and unnoticed poor and marginalized who knocked at her family’s door. And, most importantly, because she knew “something was wrong,” she “listened to the warnings” and, against all traditional, cultural, and conventional wisdom, she “climbed to higher ground and was saved.” Again, paradoxically, as only God’s designs could envision, Clare’s climbing to “higher ground” set her on a journey of choosing not upward, but downward nobility --- a journey that would take an irrevocable turn on Palm Sunday, 1212, in the cathedral of San Rufino. From that day forward, Clare would “keep the vigil of mystery,” always watching for the “one small wave.”

*Pause --- Recall and share the story of Clare on Palm Sunday, 1212.*

“Keeping the vigil of mystery” is essential to human life, but especially to a life of prayer. For Franciscans, however, it is essential that we keep our prayer vigil in the presence of the mystery of Incarnation. In her book, *Franciscan Prayer*, Ilia Delio, OSF, states: “The simplest way to describe Franciscan prayer is that it begins and ends with the Incarnation.”<sup>(4)</sup> From my perspective, this kind of “incarnational prayer” is grounded in a contemplative way of life that sees and hears the cyclic pattern of flesh made Word and Word made flesh repeated over and over again in the ebb and flow of one’s own life experience. Such a vision of life demands a disciplined and focused attentiveness to both the subtle and the seismic “stirrings” of the water: to both the formative, daily experiences, as well as to the unique and unrepeatable transformative events which happen over the course of one’s life journey and indicate the unmistakable presence of the invisible God become visible in Jesus Christ.

*Pause / Reflect --- Share: express in your own words what you think the author means by “incarnational prayer.”*

Although we have no extant prayers from Clare as we have from Francis, that is, prayers consciously written as such, the formative experiences of her daily prayer life in San Damiano evidence her own incarnation of the ebb and flow of the Paschal Mystery. Her four *Letters to Agnes of Prague*,<sup>(5)</sup> along with the witness of her own sisters whose testimony is recorded in *The Acts of the Process of Canonization*, invite each of us to “gaze,” “consider,” and “contemplate” the heart of this woman where we, too, can touch the “stirrings of the Spirit” expressed in her unwavering, “passionate desire” for “the Poor Crucified.” It is these letters and the text of her life that we want to “read,” reflect upon, and pray with – so that, like Clare, we might “be strengthened in the holy service” which we have undertaken (*1Lag,13*) and direct our “attention to what we should desire above all else: to have the Spirit of the Lord and Its holy activity, to pray always to Him with a pure heart” (*RCI, 10:9*).

### **Before Her Conversion: Clare’s Preferential Option for the Poor**

The formative experiences of her daily life, even before her conversion, attest to the truth that, from her earliest days, Clare knows how to “gaze” at the world in which she lives. It is this “world” that she brings before God in prayer – this “flesh” of the “other” that she carries in her own heart. Ingrid Peterson, OSF, acknowledges that “The testimonies of the women who lived in the house of Favarone Offreduccio help to construct a picture of Clare as a

young woman in the midst of Assisi's activity" and a "portrait" of the household as "an extended family of holy women."<sup>(6)</sup> In this primary sacred space with women of like vision, who "either lived together or came together frequently for common spiritual exercises,"<sup>(7)</sup> Clare finds support for the penitential way of life she has chosen.

Many of these women were later examined by the Church as part of the process of Clare's canonization. Witness after witness from among these women agree with Pacifica de Guelfuccio of Assisi, the first person to be interviewed and to narrate Clare's story: "while that holy woman (Clare) was in the world in her father's house...she was considered by all those who knew her (to be a person) of great honesty and of very good life; and that she was intent upon and occupied with works of piety"<sup>(Proc 1.1)</sup>.<sup>(8)</sup> However, it is only Pacifica who notes most exactly that, although "all the citizens held her in great veneration," Clare herself had already narrowed her gaze: "Lady Clare very much loved the poor"<sup>(Proc 1.3)</sup>.

We can only imagine what happens within Clare's own heart as, day after day, "she willingly visited the poor"<sup>(Proc 1.4)</sup> and prays with and shares those experiences within the "enclosure" of the Offreduccio household. What we do know is that this formative "gazing" on the "flesh" of those who are poor leads her to "consider" the Crucified Word that was calling and challenging her to incarnate a way of life markedly different from that of her contemporaries. To glimpse the mystery of God at work in the heart of Clare, I again turn to Jessica Powers whose poem, "The Master Beggar," offers us some insight into what happens with this kind of formative gazing and considering: flesh made Word becomes *the* Word made flesh and one truly sees the face of Jesus in the face of those who are poor.

#### **"The Master Beggar"**

Worse than the poorest mendicant alive,  
the pencil man, the blind man with his breath  
of music shaming all who do not give, --  
are You to me, Jesus of Nazareth.  
Must You take up Your post on every block  
of every street? Do I have no release?  
Is there no room of earth that I can lock  
to Your sad face, Your pitiful whisper "Please"?  
I seek the counters of time's gleaming store  
but make no purchases, for You are there.  
How can I waste one coin while you implore  
with tear-soiled cheeks and dark blood-matted hair?  
And when I offer You in charity  
pennies minted by love, -- still, still You stand  
fixing Your sorrowful wide eyes on me.  
Must all my purse be emptied in Your hand?  
Jesus, my beggar, what would You have of me?  
Father and mother? The lover I longed to know?  
The child I would have cherished tenderly?  
Even the blood that through my heart's valves flow?  
I, too, would be a beggar. Long tormented,  
I dream to grant You all -- and stand apart  
with you on some bleak corner; tear-frequented,  
and trouble mankind for its human heart.<sup>(9)</sup>

—Jessica Powers

*Pause / Reflect --- Discuss the poem and Clare's early life at home.*

“Jesus, my beggar ... I too would be a beggar.” True contemplation leads to imitation and, again, the flesh of Jesus becomes the committed Word of God incarnated in this woman who chose to be poor – as Jesus was poor and as those who are poor, were poor.

In order to give “flesh” to the Word which she hears in her own prayer, Clare, before she is eighteen years old, makes a radical break with her social class by selling her inheritance and giving the money to the poor.<sup>(10)</sup> By disposing of her inheritance in this way, she not only gives her assets to those who are poor, but she herself becomes poor. Clare Marie Ledoux elaborates on the significance of this choice as an irreversible turning point in the life of Clare:

From then on, her opting for poverty set her up against the noble class of her lineage. From the time of her conversion, poverty became and would remain for Clare a way of life, the indispensable foundation for realizing her religious ideal. By her choice to live in poverty, like Francis, although in her own original way, Clare was challenging a society in which strength, power and money were masters and in which the church itself was the empire’s rival power.<sup>(11)</sup>

Renouncing her inheritance, along with the private vow of virginity she had previously made,<sup>(12)</sup> solidifies Clare’s undesirability as a prospective bride, thus protecting the inviolability of the decision she had made to receive her holy vocation. Ingrid Peterson, OSF, notes the practical wisdom Clare evidences in making such a conscious and counter-cultural choice:

Clare claimed legal and social rights in choosing poverty, and the personal right to make decisions about her body in choosing the state of virginity. Seizing these individual rights, Clare was able to bring to her religious reception ‘the gift of poverty and the vow of chaste virginity,’ described as her dowry by Pope Innocent IV.<sup>(13)</sup>

Throughout her life, Clare will continue to display this kind of practical wisdom in dealing with both the political and ecclesial environments in which she finds herself. However, it is the wisdom of her heart, her “passionate desire” to imitate “the Poor Crucified,” that impels her to “grant Jesus all, and stand apart with Him.” Indeed, she had “emptied” her entire “purse” into the “hand” of the “Master Beggar”: “The lover she longed to know . . . The child she would have cherished tenderly.”

As we ourselves take a contemplative gaze at the process underneath the narrative of these events which occurred even before her “conversion,” we see that the “stirrings” reveal a formative pattern of incarnational prayer – really, incarnational living – that will thread through the tapestry of Clare’s life. She “gazes” on the “flesh” of her daily experience because she knows that all that is created has the potential to speak to her of God and that the human person who “groans” in concert with all of creation is the privileged place for God’s self-revelation in Christ (*cf. Rom 8:22*). If, through prayer and reflection, she then “considers” her experiences, that is, she listens to them “in stereo”<sup>(14)</sup> and looks at them again in the light of the Gospels, that “flesh” becomes the “Word of God” that invites her into a contemplative experience with the “Word made flesh” in Jesus Christ. In that mysterious place within the human heart where lovers meet, she “contemplates” herself, both as she is and as she is transformed by the One who loves her. And in that mystic moment, so “desiring to imitate” the One she loves, she truly becomes, in her own flesh, the image of this Word of Love. This process, as we describe it happening in Clare, also happens in each of us if we truly desire, like her, to “be a beggar” too. Flesh made Word and Word made flesh: this is the movement and the mystery of incarnational prayer.

*Pause / Reflect --- Discuss Clare’s choices. What motivates her decisions?  
Express in your own words what you now understand by “incarnational prayer.”*

### **Clare’s Conversion: Making the Passover with Christ**

If this “pattern” of prayer is already discernible in Clare before her conversion, how, then, are we to understand the Palm Sunday event? Given the fact that Clare is leading a penitential way of life before meeting

Francis, it seems more consistent to view her conversion, not so much as the radical shift of life orientation which luminal experiences provide, but rather as a radical shift in how Clare is to give expression to what she had already discerned as her call.<sup>(15)</sup> When Clare leaves her family home and her former way of expressing her call, she takes on the beginnings of a new form of life which will enable her to continue to express that same call at a deeper level.

Although Clare herself remembers this experience on Palm Sunday as the moment of her “conversion” and a critical turning point in her personal journey,<sup>(16)</sup> it must more importantly be viewed as the inevitable consequence of her “daily” fidelity to the kind of incarnational prayer we have already seen evidenced in her *before* her conversion. In fact, according to Margaret Carney, OSF, Clare’s conversion is an experience in which she “summoned the primordial and graced energies of her entire human existence and focused them into a laser point of light and fortitude.”<sup>(17)</sup>

*Pause / Reflect --- Share a “conversion” story from your own personal life.*

What “stirrings of the Spirit” move Clare to such a “primordial and graced” place? What “mystery” compels this woman to journey with certainty into a completely unknown future, walking in “light and fortitude”? In reflecting on her own “conversion experience,” one grounded in her own kind of incarnational prayer, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, Mary Oliver, offers us her own answer to these questions and may provide some insight into what may have been happening in the heart of Clare. “Listen” to her poem “The Journey,” and “lean” with me to “catch the stirrings” in her heart, in Clare’s heart, and in your own.

### **“The Journey”**

One day you finally knew  
what you had to do, and began,  
though the voices around you  
kept shouting  
their bad advice—  
though the whole house  
began to tremble  
and you felt the old tug  
at your ankles.  
“Mend my life!”  
each voice cried.  
But you didn’t stop.  
You knew what you had to do,  
though the wind pried  
with its stiff fingers  
at the very foundations,  
though their melancholy  
was terrible.  
It was already late  
enough, and a wild night,  
and the road full of fallen  
branches and stones.  
But little by little  
as you left their voices behind,  
the stars began to burn  
through the sheets of clouds,  
  
and there was a new voice  
which you slowly

recognized as your own,  
that kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world,  
determined to do  
the only thing you could do –  
determined to save  
the only life you could save.<sup>(18)</sup>

--Mary Oliver

Palm Sunday is this kind of “one day” for Clare, “the day “she finally knew what (she) had to do, and began, though the voices around (her) kept shouting their bad advice.” In that moment when, according to the author of *The Legend of Saint Clare*, she “remained immobile in her place” (LCI, 7), all the days of faithful gazing come together with the unmistakable clarity that is contemplative certainty, and she “knew what (she) had to do, though the wind pried with its stiff fingers at the very foundations, though their melancholy was terrible.”

As she continues to participate in the celebration of the liturgy and hears, as she has probably never heard before, the proclamation of the Passion, flesh again becomes Word for her, and she feels confirmed in the choice she had already considered: to let the Word become flesh in her by making her own Passover in imitation of the Jesus whom she experiences as remaining poor and powerless in the face of his impending death. With the “light and fortitude” she receives in this mystic moment, Clare is convinced that the only response to the love of an all good God poured out in the kenosis of Jesus Christ is the extravagance of a love fully expressed only in a life of absolute poverty, that is, in the alabaster vessel of her very self, broken and poured out.

And so, although “it was already late enough, and a wild night, and the road full of fallen branches and stones,” Clare “left (all other) voices behind” and, as *The Legend* continues, “she embarked upon her long desired flight.” Her departure, described in the most powerful symbols of death and resurrection, takes her on a journey away from her family home, by way of “that other door” which “she broke open with her own hands,” to a place outside the walls of all that was familiar and through the darkness of the woods that finally leads her from Assisi to the Portiuncula and eventually to San Damiano.<sup>(19)</sup> In this place, Clare will live her remaining forty-two years in daily faithfulness to the gift of her vocation given to her by a faithful God.

She witnesses to this experience of mutual fidelity at the very beginning of her *Testament*:

Among the other gifts that we have received and continue to receive from our magnanimous **Father of mercies**<sup>(2Cor 1:3)</sup>, and for which we must express the deepest thanks to our glorious God, there is our vocation, which the more perfect and greater it is, the more are we indebted to Him *(TestCl 2-3)*.

*Pause / Reflect --- Discuss each of your own “vocations”. Do you look upon them as a gift from God?*

*Take a fifteen minute snack break.*

It is to Clare’s daily life of incarnational prayer that we will next turn our attention. As we read the text of her life and letters, we will journey with her in discovering that the “new voice” which she “slowly recognized as “her own,” was, indeed, becoming the voice of “the Poor Crucified” Christ who “kept (her) company as (she) strode deeper and deeper into the world.”

### **Living in San Damiano: “The Fullness of the Incarnation”**

As we now keep Clare “company” on her journey “deeper and deeper” into the world, I offer us a caution. Although we will walk this journey with Clare in a kind of “sequential” manner and will explore, in somewhat of a

“logical” order, the daily experience of her gazing, considering, contemplating, and imitating, we need to remember that, as we know from our own experience, life events, especially those which involve developing relationships, do not happen in logical or sequential order. Rather, they spiral downward in ever narrowing and deepening circles through providentially directed happenings which occur simultaneously, spontaneously, surprisingly, and seldom safely. Almost never developing or progressing in the kind of clearly delineated stages which we sometimes use to mark the movements and turns in the spiritual journey, they nevertheless transform us in such a way that there is no turning around or turning back – only turning forward and turning toward.

The irrevocable and irreversible place in which Clare finds herself after Palm Sunday, 1212 – the interior place in which she stands as she begins her life in San Damiano – is captured well, I believe, in a poem by David Whyte entitled “All the True Vows.”

### **All the True Vows**

All the true vows  
are secret vows  
the ones we speak out loud  
are the ones we break.

There is only one life  
you can call your own  
and a thousand others  
you can call by any name you want.  
Hold to the truth you make  
every day with your own body,  
don't turn your face away.

Hold to your own truth  
at the center of the image  
you were born with.

Those who do not understand  
their destiny will never understand  
the friends they have made  
nor the work they have chosen

Nor the one life that waits  
beyond all the others.

By the lake in the wood  
in the shadows  
you can  
whisper that truth  
to the quiet reflection  
you see in the water.

Whatever you hear from  
the water, remember,

it wants to carry  
the sound of its truth on your lips.

Remember,



in this place  
no one can hear you  
  
and out of the silence  
you can make a promise  
it will kill you to break,  
  
that way you'll find  
what is real and what is  
not.  
  
I know what I am saying.  
Time almost forsook me  
and I looked again.  
Seeing my reflection  
I broke a promise  
and spoke  
  
for the first time  
after all these years  
  
in my own voice,  
  
before it was too late  
to turn my face again.(21)

*Pause / Reflect --- Share: What is David Whyte's message in this poem?  
How does it speak to Clare's experience? How does it speak to your own experience?*

Throughout her life in San Damiano, Clare will “hold to the truth” – to the “true vows” to which she committed herself on Palm Sunday. She will “hold to (her) own truth at the center of the image (she was) born with”, and, borne from the “silence” of her prayer, she will “carry the sound of its truth on (her) lips.” And every day, as she hears “the Poor Crucified” Christ “whisper that truth to the quiet reflection” she sees when she looks at herself in the eyes of Jesus, Clare will choose again to live that truth rooted in “a promise” that it would “kill (her) to break.”

Again, it is Ilia Delio, OSF, who explains this formative and transformative interchange between how one lives and how one prays:

...contemplation is bound to transformation. We cannot help seeing – gazing – on the crucified God for long without being changed. And this change, this gazing on the God of self-giving love, must eventually impel us to love by way of self-gift. In this way, we realize the greatness of our vocation that is to bear Christ, to become a Christic person. Only in and through this “Christification” do we see the world as the sacrament of God, and all of creation as holy ground. Engagement with the other becomes an engagement with God. Contemplation is not directed toward heaven, but toward the fullness of the Incarnation.(22)

It is to “the fullness of the Incarnation” that Clare directs her gaze during the forty-two years in which she lives in San Damiano. Unlike her contemporaries, that is, other enclosed communities of women whose monastic regulations proscribed restrictions around seeing and being seen,(23) Clare continues to direct her “gaze” – and that of her sisters – on the “flesh” of those who are poor. On any given day, the “poor” might appear on the other side of the parlor or choir grille as the face of a hungry beggar who comes to share in the meager portion of bread that the sisters could offer. After the death of Francis, the “poor” might look like a pilgrim journeying to visit the places already named “holy” in the popular imagination of those who knew or knew of the Poverello and his brothers. At

other times, the “poor” might take the form of a friar returning from his mission in Africa with all the news of how the Gospel was being preached.

In whatever face appears in the frame of this grilled icon, Clare sees the face of “the Poor Crucified” Christ, the same face that she gazes upon when she prays before the icon of the crucifix that had spoken to Francis in the early days of his conversion. But, as Michael Blastic, OFM Conv., so insightfully notes, Clare does not gaze only on Jesus: “The uniqueness of the San Damiano cross lies in the image of a Jesus who is not alone – he is surrounded by others.”<sup>(24)</sup> So, too, Clare is surrounded by her sisters as together they gaze on “the fullness of the Incarnation” imaged, not only in this icon, but in the faces of one another. And, in this mutual exchange of loving reverence, they are formative and transformative for one another.

*Pause / Reflect --- Discuss how prayer / contemplation is “bound to transformation” – is not directed toward heaven – but toward the fullness of the Incarnation. Does your personal experience confirm this insight? Explain.*

This Christ, who is Brother to each of them, continues throughout Clare’s life to return her gaze, his eyes silently speaking the same words spoken to Francis: “Go and repair my house.”<sup>(25)</sup> Thomas of Celano testifies to the efficacy of Clare’s life and of her prayer in rebuilding, not only the Church and the world, but the Franciscan “order” itself: “The Lady Clare, a native of the city of Assisi, the most precious and strongest stone of the whole structure, stands as the foundation for all the other stones. . . . A noble structure of precious pearls arose above this woman” (1Cel 8:18).

So, day after day, flesh becomes Word and Word becomes flesh as Clare gazes upon the “face” of those who are poor and upon the face of “the Poor Crucified” Christ imaged in her sisters and in the icon that is always before her, and she is formed and transformed and rebuilds the Church in the process. Her life experience, then, is formative for her prayer and her prayer formative for her life. Of this intimate connection between the concerns of her world and her enclosed daily life and daily prayer, Marco Bartoli writes:

She (Clare) transcended the limits of the hermitage (read enclosure) in two directions: from the inside toward the outside, by accepting that she was an example, a model, one who had something to say to the whole Church; and from the outside towards the inside, by the way in which she and her sisters welcomed whoever and whatever came from the outside, so that everything becomes their concern.<sup>(26)</sup>

Like the Moken fisherman we spoke of earlier, Clare knows how and where to look. And, who and what she sees looks back at her, and she is transformed in the process. However, everything and everyone that Clare sees also has its own voice which speaks to her with formative and transformative power. From the “outside” she hears the poor, the pilgrim, the friar, and, from the “inside,” the voices of her sisters. So, like that same fisherman, she also needs to know how to listen and how to choose what to really “consider” from all that she hears. In the “strange silence” so essential to her enclosed life in San Damiano, Clare listens to each of these voices. However, like her gazing through the grille, Clare’s listening to both the silence and the speaking is also framed: framed by her communal experience of Eucharist and of her praying with her sisters the Liturgy of the Hours which marks the passing of time each day, as well as the movement through the seasons each year.

Within the rhythm of this liturgical prayer, Clare listens day after day and year after year to the “Song of the Suffering Servant,” sung in the music of the Scriptural Word and played out in her own life and in the lives of her sisters. Over and over again, she hears the story of the same “Poor Crucified” Christ, upon whom she is gazing, recounted in the Gospels and proclaimed by the prophets and offered for her consideration and meditation. And, in chorus with her sisters, Clare lifts her own voice in the psalms, hymns, and inspired songs<sup>(cf. Col 3:16)</sup> which were part of the Liturgy of the Hours of the medieval Church. The paschal experience of Jesus, central to all liturgical prayer, is the mystery within which she chooses to pattern her own life’s rhythm and keeps faithful “vigil.”

*Pause / Reflect --- What thoughts do you take from the author’s commentary on Clare’s “First Letter to Agnes”?*

In *The Second Letter to Agnes of Prague*, written between 1234 and 1238, Clare speaks of the formative power of this kind of prayer through which one listens to and considers one's life within the context of this larger Word of God. It impacts, Clare tells Agnes and each of us, the very way in which we hear our lives happening at a more deeply, emotional level:

*If you suffer with Him, you will reign with Him.  
weeping with Him, you will rejoice with Him;  
dying on the cross of tribulation with Him,  
you will possess heavenly mansions with Him  
among the splendor of the saints  
and in the Book of Life, your name will be called glorious among the peoples (2LAg 21).*

And, as Clare listens to this mystery, not only in the Scriptural Word, but also "considers" this mystery in the word which comes to her in the cries of those who are poor, in the voices of her sisters, and in the word spoken in the silence of her own heart, she hears the same message: no matter the source, the Word which she is always invited to "consider" is the Word made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ and how this Word calls her to be poor in imitation of him.

Always, always, it is Clare's "passionate desire" for "the Poor Crucified" which drives her and leads her. This is what her gazing leads her to see. This is what her listening leads her to consider and eventually understand: that for love of her, Jesus freely takes upon himself the limits inherent in being flesh – the poverty intrinsic to being human. Once Clare brings the consideration of this truth to the point of conviction, nothing can deter her. This vision of poverty as having a privileged place because Jesus is "the Poor Crucified" One will determine how she sees not only herself, but the way of life she envisions for her sisters. Indeed, it is this vision that empowers her strong-willed, tenacious, and unyielding grip on the "Privilege of Poverty" granted to her by the Church. Finally, it is this vision that enables Clare to contemplate in such a way that this Word becomes flesh in her, over and over again, and always more deeply and truly.

Her contemplating empowers her to see herself as she is, to see herself as a "we" with her sisters,<sup>(28)</sup> and to see herself and all others in and as the image of Christ. Her acceptance of the poverty of being human – of saying "yes" with one's life to the limits of being human and to the glory of loving without limits – unites her with Jesus in an intimate and inextricable way. So contemplation necessitates imitation, and imitation, transformation, and the Word again becomes flesh: Christ is imaged in Clare and Clare is constantly being reimaged as herself and re-created as the image of Christ. "What is original to Clare is that transformation/imitation of Christ cannot take place apart from contemplation, and contemplation involves self-identity or acceptance of oneself in relation to God."<sup>(29)</sup>

*Pause / Reflect --- What does Clare's "gazing" enable her to see and eventually to understand?  
Does your own experience confirm Clare's insights? Discuss.*

Clare sees herself and, consequently, her sisters and every other person, inserted into the mystery of Christ and, through Christ, into the mystery of God, in a very real, ontological way. Her much reflected upon "mirror" image, obviously borne from her own prayer experience, invites us to contemplate continually both the mystery of being human and the mystery of God become human, the Word incarnate who is always and forever "the Poor Crucified" Christ. In *The Third Letter to Agnes of Prague*, Clare offers Agnes spiritual direction, as it were, by focusing her contemplation:

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, through contemplation,  
**transform** your entire being **into the image**  
of the Godhead Itself <sup>(3Lag 12-13).</sup>

Although the imperatives of her injunction may sound daunting to us, Clare believes this call is for everyone: for those “outside” as well as for those “inside.” She “provides a common path to contemplation because what she advocates is daily prayer before the cross—something every person can do . . . (because) the cross provides the most honest reflection of ourselves.”<sup>(30)</sup> To contemplate the suffering Christ is to look at the poverty of our own human condition and that of others and know that God understands because, in Jesus, God has been where we are. To contemplate Christ crucified is to look at ourselves and others and know that death does not have the last word because the Incarnate Word, risen in glory, speaks the Word of Life. Ledoux says very clearly:

The mystery of poverty essentially is part of the mystery of salvation and the gospel. Poverty is evangelical in the strongest sense of the term. It is in and by it that we live the heart of the Good News. Christ’s Resurrection is the revelation of the staggering fruitfulness of poverty. Christ the Lord is indeed the “poor Christ” of Nazareth, raised in glory because he lived poverty to the extreme limit of love. All human beings benefit from this rising, not just the oppressed and the hungry but also the richest among us.<sup>(31)</sup>

*Pause / Reflect --- What does being human have to do with poverty?  
– and how does that relate to the crucified Christ?*

So, all of us are called to heed the advice Clare offers in *The Fourth Letter to Agnes of Prague* about the necessity of praying with “the Poor Crucified” Christ. In this letter, probably written just months before her death, we find Clare reiterating the imperatives of praying in the incarnational way we have spent this time together describing and reflecting upon: prayer in which flesh becomes Word so that *the Word* can again become flesh in you and in me. Look on the Crucified Christ now, and listen to Clare’s words as we bring our time to a close:

**Gaze** upon that mirror each day, O Queen and spouse of Jesus Christ, and continually study your face in it . . . . Indeed, in that mirror, blessed poverty, holy humility, and inexpressible charity shine forth, as with the grace of God, you will be able to contemplate them throughout the entire mirror. . . . **Look**, I say, at the border of this mirror, that is, the poverty of Him Who was placed in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes . . . . Then **reflect upon**, at the surface of the mirror, the holy humility, at least the blessed poverty, the untold labors and punishments that He endured for the redemption of the whole human race. Finally **contemplate**, in the depth of this same mirror, the ineffable charity that He chose to suffer on the tree of the Cross and to die there the most shameful kind of death<sup>(4Lag 15-26)</sup>.

Like Clare, *gaze* on Jesus, and you will become like the One you see. Like Clare, *consider* Jesus and you will be transformed. Like Clare, *contemplate* Jesus and you will see yourself with new eyes as you look at him looking back at you with delight and with love. And finally, like Clare, *imitate* Jesus of the Gospels, the Incarnate Word of God, and, follow his way of washing feet, nourishing others from your table, healing the sick and the sick of heart, preaching by your example, and living poverty stretched out to the limits of love.

Like Clare, the experiences of my daily life and, thus, of my daily prayer can be formative for me, that is, they can hover over my interior chaos as the “stirrings of the Spirit” of the living God creatively at work within me. As truly my “flesh,” these experiences can reveal and speak God’s Word to me in such a powerful and creative way that they can, in the words of the old charismatic hymn, “melt me” and “mold me,” indeed, recreate me into the image and likeness of *the Word* made Flesh: Jesus Christ. My prayer, then, is bound with my life in such an inextricably mutual way that it becomes what I have called incarnational prayer: flesh becomes Word and Word becomes flesh, in Christ and in me.

*Who* or *what* I gaze upon in my daily experience and in my daily prayer matters, then, because it is *formative* for me in this *incarnational* way. And, depending on “who” the who is or “what” the what is, I may be formed in this

incarnational way in the image and likeness of Jesus Christ, or in some other image and likeness. In either case, I am being formed and transformed, so I need, like Clare, to choose wisely *who or what I look upon*. As we reflect on Clare's own gazing and on her exhortation to Agnes, we must ask ourselves: Who or what do I gaze upon in my daily experience? Who or what do I gaze upon when I come to prayer or to my prayer space? Do I see *those who are poor*? Do I see those who are poor? Do I see *my sisters and/or brothers* with whom I live? Do I see my sisters and brothers with whom I live?

*Pause / Reflect --- Discuss the importance of the "who" or "what" I gaze upon.  
Are you agreed – even convinced – that it makes a difference?*

I also need, like Clare, to choose wisely who or what I listen to, who or what I 'consider' in my daily experience and in my daily prayer because again, these are formative for me. As we reflect on Clare's own considering and on her exhortation to Agnes, we must ask ourselves: Who or what do I listen to and consider in my daily experience? Who or what do I listen to and consider when I come to prayer or to my prayer space? Do I really listen to the voices of others and take these voices to the silence of my own prayer? Is the Scriptural Word the focus of my listening and considering so that it becomes formative for me, or does my listening and considering focus elsewhere? What is the place of silence in my day? In my prayer?

*Pause / Reflect in silence on these questions.*

What is the place of communal liturgical prayer in the rhythm of my day, my week, my year? How is it that I pray with my sisters or with my brothers in community? How is it that I pray with others? What is the focus of our listening and considering in these communal prayer experiences? How is this prayer incarnational, forming me in such a way that it deepens my desire to en flesh the paschal mystery of Jesus in my own life, that is, in poverty stretched out to the limits of love?

*Pause / Reflect in silence on these questions.*

I also need to reflect on who or what I see when I look in the metaphorical "mirror" of myself. As we reflect on the intimate connection Clare sees between contemplation and imitation and on her exhortation to Agnes in this regard, we must ask ourselves: Do I see myself as I truly am – both flawed and graced? Do I see myself, not only as "the fairest one of all," but also as part of the human family, as one who is truly intrinsically poor and, therefore one with and at home with those who are poor? Do I dare to see the image of "the Poor Crucified" One when I contemplate myself and experience myself as "beloved" by God, both as myself and as the image of the Christ? Does this vision impel me, like the One I contemplate, to imitate his choice for the downward mobility that led him to live poverty stretched to the extreme limits of love? How do I contemplate others in the light of this vision, especially my sisters and brothers in community (family)? How does my imitation look like washing feet, nourishing others from my table, healing the sick and the sick of heart, and preaching by example – all in mutual exchange?

*Pause / Reflect in silence on these questions.*

## **Conclusion: Climbing to Higher Ground**

Unlike the commercial fisherman who had neither the eyes nor the ears of the Moken, see the "one small wave" and listen to the call to climb to "higher ground." It is from this vantage point that, like Jesus, like Clare, we will again be impelled by love to make the choice for downward mobility and the privilege of poverty. And, in the "strange silence" that we have come to understand as the paradoxical voice of God, we too will hear "The Song of the Waterfall" that the sojourner, Much-Afraid, hears on her passage to the "High Places" in Hannah Hurnard's classic allegory on the journey of the spiritual life.

Toward the mid-point of the story, the Shepherd leads Much-Afraid to the “Place of Anointing” where she will make the choice for downward mobility and begin the final phase of her journey to the “High Places.” As they stand together “at the foot of the cliffs,” they hear the “voice of a mighty waterfall . . . whose rushing waters sprang from the snows in the High Places themselves . . . . As she listened, Much-Afraid realized that she was hearing the full majestic harmonies, the whole orchestra as it were . . . thousands upon thousands of voices . . . yet still the same song:

From the heights we leap and go  
To the valleys down below,  
Always answering the call,  
To the lowest place of all.

When the Shepherd asks Much-Afraid, “What do you think of this fall of great waters in their abandonment of self-giving?” she replies, “I think they are beautiful and terrible beyond anything which I ever saw before.” “Why terrible?” the Shepherd asks, already knowing the answer. “It is the leap which they have to make, the awful height from which they must cast themselves down to the depths beneath, there to be broken on the rocks. I can hardly bear to watch it.” However, at the bidding of the shepherd, Much-Afraid looks more closely, and begins to see her experience with his eyes and to hear “The Song of the Waterfall” with his ears and so is able to make the rest of the journey. The Shepherd says:

At first sight perhaps the leap does look terrible, but as you can see the water itself finds no terror in it, no moment of hesitation or shrinking, only joy unspeakable, and full of glory, because it is the movement natural to it. Self-giving is its life. It has only one desire, to go down and down and give itself with no reserve or holding back of any kind.<sup>(32)</sup>

Let this be our prayer: to have this “only one desire.” Like Jesus, like Clare, like Much—Afraid let us listen, in our living and in our praying, to the “stirrings of the Spirit” in “The Song of the waterfall” that is the Paschal Mystery of the “Poor Crucified” Christ. Like Jesus, like Clare, like Much-Afraid let us beg for the grace to take the plunge, en flesh the Word, and fall with joy into the loving arms of God.

*Pause / Reflect – Discuss the allegory about Much-Afraid. How does it relate to my life?  
What / how does this entire article speak to me?*

\*\*\*\*\*

**About the Author:** Clare D’Auria, OSF, is a Sister of St. Francis of Philadelphia, Aston, PA. She holds an M.A. in Theological Studies from the Washington Theological Union. Clare is a certified spiritual director who has served on her congregational leadership team, and in retreat ministry, offering directed and conference retreats as well as numerous workshops in Franciscan spirituality throughout the United States.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Endnotes

1 *Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers*, Eds. Regina Siegfried, ASSC, and Robert F. Morneau (Kansas City, Mo: Sheed and Ward, 1989).

2 2LAg, 20. All citations from the early documents written by or about Clare of Assisi are taken from *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, Revised edition and trans. Regis J. Armstrong, OFM, Cap. (New York: New city Press, 2006). Hereafter, all citations will be noted within the text.

3 “Sea Gypsies See Signs In The Waves,” *60 Minutes*, CBS Broadcasting, Inc., March 20, 2005.

- 4 Ilia Delio, *Franciscan Prayer* (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2004), 181.
- 5 See Clare Marie Ledoux *Clare of Assisi: Her Spirituality Revealed in Her Letters*, Tans. Colette Joly Dees (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1996), 2.
- 6 *Clare of Assisi: A Biographical Study* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1993), 83.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 92.
- 8 See also the testimonies of Benvenuta of Perugia (Proc 2.2), Filippa de Leonardo di Gislerio (Proc 3.2), Amata di Martino (Proc 4.2).
- 9 *Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers*.
- 10 Proc 2.22; 12.3; 13.10; 19.2.
- 11 Ledoux, 10-11.
- 12 Proc 2.2; 19.1.
- 13 Peterson, 102.
- 14 See Francis Dorff, OP, *The Art of Passing Over: An Invitation to Living Creatively*, Integration Books (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988). See especially Part I: On Listening and Hearing Creatively, 9-34.
- 15 For an interesting study on the distinction between conversion stories presented by male authors as experiences of “liminality” and by female authors as experiences of “continuity,” see Caroline Walker Bynum, “Women’s Stories, Women’s Symbols: A Critique of Victor Turner’s Theory of Liminality,” in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 27-51.
- 16 See *Testament*, 24-26.
- 17 Margaret Carney, OSF, *The First Franciscan Woman: Clare of Assisi and Her Form of Life* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1993), 132.
- 18 *New and Selected Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 114-115.
- 19 See *The Legend of Saint Clare*, 10.
- 20 “All neat organizations of the spiritual life are hindsight creations. After events, activities, and people have provoked our spirits to journey to another place, we look back and sort out the chaos into some form of orderly progression. We may even dare to talk about providence. But we should notice that providential interpretations are usually backward looks from a safe place. When events, activities, and people are actually happening, the spiritual life has the “feel” of an insight here, a quandary there, and a sense of being on the very edge of something everywhere ... in the spiritual life the mind is often the last to know.” See John Shea, *Starlight: Beholding the Christmas Miracle All Year Long* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 14-15.
- 21 *The House of Belonging* (Langley, Washington: Many Rivers Press, 2002).
- 22 Delio, *Franciscan Prayer*, 138.
- 23 See Marco Bartoli, *Clare of Assisi*, trans. Sister Frances Teresa, OSC (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1993), 76-97.
- 24 From personal correspondence, February 23, 2006.
- 25 LMj 2.1. All citations from the early documents written by or about Francis of Assisi are taken from *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, Eds. Regis J. Armstrong, OFM, Cap., J.A. Wayne Hellmann, OFM, Conv., William J. Short, OFM. (New York: New City Press, 2000). Hereafter, all citations will be noted within the text.
- 26 Bartoli, 87.
- 27 Peterson, 164.
- 28 See *Testament*, 2-3. In contrast, see Francis’s *The Testament*, 1-3.
- 29 Delio, 130.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 128.
- 31 Ledoux, 55.
- 32 Hannah Hurnard, *Hinds’ Feet on High Places* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1975), 184-87.

\*\*\*\*\*

