

Conversion and Clare

From *This Living Mirror* by Sr. Francis Theresa OSC

Definition of Conversion: “We begin to do penance, when we turn our eyes from ourselves unto God.” (Sr. Francis Theresa) Penance was the word used during the historical period when Clare lived.

For Clare, turning one’s eyes toward God (gazing) also meant turning one’s eyes toward God’s people.

Clare’s Initial Conversion:

--She learned to live life in God’s abundance; this learning began in her childhood with her mother Ortolana, and the women members of her family

--She heard a clear call from God to be a mirror reflecting Christ’s complete self-emptying, reflecting the way he had emptied himself of glory and became one with humans, emptied himself as a servant to become one of us. She chose not to give mercy from afar but to join those who were poor by living a poor life.

--She was called to leave her aristocratic home and be among those who were served. Previous to her leaving her family home, she lived a prayerful life with the women in the Offreduccio home, sold her inheritance and gave her assets to those who were poor. Already she was living a penitential life.

--When blocks to the doorway were cleared and she stepped into the dark piazza, she came to the moment which she later called ‘the beginning of my conversion’.

- She left her protected childhood
- Experienced a breach with her mother, sisters, & family; threw herself on God’s care
- With this rite of passage, she left security, privilege, comfort, respect honor and perhaps fame, values of her social group were no longer acceptable to her
- From this moment on, she was, to some degree, homeless as young girl

Like The Exodus

--Leaving her home with its blocked doorway was like passing through the Red Sea—the dynamite of the spirit was needed for the beginning of her conversion

--Clare’s enlightenment was a revelation to her heart about God, about the quality of God’s love for her, and about the nature of the response she wished to make

--Clare went from place to place, aimless, waiting, with no peace of mind, seeking for she knew not what. She had to escape, to be pursued and hounded, harassed and rescued, she had to wander in an inner wilderness until she came to San Damiano

--Called from exploitation and acquisition to imitate the generosity of God, she embarked on a search for integrity, grace, character,

--God was doing a new work in Clare, establishing a new vision by a woman. She had confronted the “heart’s labyrinth, and found a new way.” Her darkness was confronted by the light of Christ. She confronted her wild beasts.

Meeting Francis in the wilderness

---cut off her hair at the Porziuncola, a sign she now belonged to God, giving her society a bill of divorce

-- --Benedictine monastery of San Paolo, life of a penniless servant, experienced what it was like to be powerless and unimportant, to have no clout in a world where might is right., experienced violent reaction of uncles,

--Church of Sant 'Angelo in Panzo—praying and resting and growing in understanding, asked that her sister Catherine might join her, 16 days after her own conversion Catherine joined her.

accepted a life of downward nobility

--Needed to decide what to do—period of uncertainty and indecision before her arrival at San Damiano; “Clare waited like a beggar, a true mendicant of the spirit, asking for her needs and entrusting the future and the present to the architect of her labyrinth (paraphrase, 40)

Reflection / Sharing

1. Life for us as it was for Clare involves the economy. Life in Assisi at the beginning of the thirteenth century was about the economy. Clare walked out on the guiding light of money and it sent shock waves through her culture. Others followed her lead and pulled out of the system, saying they didn't want anything to do with it. What about me? How do I respond to society telling me that it is all about the economy? (from *The Sun and Moon* over Assisi by Gerard Thomas Straub)

2. At some point in our lives, we may have experienced conversion as did Clare. We left behind what was safe and secure and moved into the unknown for a more noble purpose. We, too, experience conversion. Can you recall a time when you left a safe or comfortable space in your life to follow a call from God. What were the ups and downs in that call? How has that made a difference in your life?

Conversion Elements Prominent in the Documents of Clare From *Francis and Clare* by Armstrong and Brady

1. Enclosure: The practice of a material separation from the world, that is the enclosure (Clare was heir to a theology of the monastic world that developed throughout the centuries.)

2. Poverty: The total permeation of daily life with the pursuit of radical poverty; conforming to the poor Christ. The pursuit of radical poverty is integrally tied to the contemplative ideal as well as to the community life embraced by Clare and her sisters in the enclosure of San Damiano.

O blessed poverty
who bestows eternal riches on those who love

and embrace her
O holy poverty
to those who possess and desire you
God promises the kingdom of heaven
and offers indeed eternal glory and blessed life
(*First Letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague*)

3. Community Life: The struggle to preserve “the unity of mutual love and peace” as a means of achieving sanctification; a poverty in which the human person comes to know his/her only real possessions: vices and sins. (the new wine of the Kingdom begins to be pressed from a bunch of grapes, namely us--Frances Teresa, 28)

There can be little doubt that the enclosed life of San Damiano struggled on a daily basis to express the unity of God. This poverty (preserving the unity), so highly praised by Pope Gregory IX, provides for Clare a capacity for God and an openness to God’s presence. It takes on a “sacramental” quality in that it is an outward expression of a much deeper reality, a poverty in which the human person comes to know his/her only real possessions: his/her vices and sins. Thus this pursuit of radical poverty is integrally tied to the contemplative ideal as well as to the community life embraced by Clare and her sister in the enclosure of San Damiano. The repetition of the concepts “holy unity” and “highest poverty” that are expressed in the introductions of Pope Innocent IV and Cardinal Raynaldus to the *Rule of Saint Clare* underscores the connection between these aspects of religious life. (182)

For an additional reference on her life lived at San Damiano and its call to continuing conversion see the article “The Incarnation Prayer of Clare of Assisi” by Clare D’Auria, in the 2006 Annual Franciscan Federation Conference.

Reflection / Sharing

1. To live a life of enclosure, radical poverty, and community life (preserving the unity of mutual love) would require that one live in continuous conversion. Imagine that you are one of the sisters that lived with Clare? Which one of the three (enclosure, radical poverty, community life) would most deeply call you to conversion?
2. Imagine that you are Clare. What do you think would be her greatest challenge, her growing edge, in living this life?

Conversion and The Rule

Clare desired to write a Rule for her sisters that would truly reflect the life they wished to live. The privilege of poverty (renouncing all possessions) was an important part of that Rule. She wrote a Rule for her community which included the privilege of poverty and spent her life petitioning Cardinals and Pope’s to accept her Rule. This was a long and arduous process, one in which she remained in dialogue with the hierarchical church.

Read “THE RULE ”from *The Sun and Moon Over Assisi* pp. 380-383.

Papal Privilege of Poverty -- granted by Pope Gregory IX to Clare on Sept. 17, 1228 shortly before her death.

Reflection / Sharing

To live a life of conversion means that we do not back down from our highest ideals and aspirations? To be converted, may mean that while clinging to our ideals, we stay in dialogue with those who have power over us. What qualities did Clare have and develop in her life that kept her in dialogue with church officials during the many years in her struggle for acceptance of her Rule and her ideals?

When have you had similar experiences as Clare – clinging to an ideal when the “powers that be” saw otherwise. How did you handle this situation?

Resources

Books

The Living Mirror by Frances Teresa OSC

Francis and Clare by Regis Armstrong OFM Cap and Ignatius Brady, OFM

The Sun and Moon Over Assisi by Gerard Thomas Straub

Clare of Assisi by Marco Bartoli; see chapters 2 and 5

Clare of Assisi by Ingrid Peterson, Chapter 11

DVD's

Chiara di Dio: The Life of Clare

Clare and Francis, Ignatius Press—Mt. St. Francis Library

VCR

St. Clare of Assisi – written / filmed for the VIII Centenary 1193-1993—Mt. St. Francis Library, Oriente Occidente Productions

Clare of Assisi – written / filmed for the VIII Centenary – Mt. St. Francis Library, Oblate Media and Communication Corporation

Readings

The Writings of Clare from *Francis and Clare* by Armstrong and Brady pp189-208

O blessed poverty, 192

A great exchange, 193

What you hold, 196

Place your mind before the mirror of eternity, 200

Music References

CD- Gaze Upon Christ and What You Hold by Cathy Tisel Nelson,