

INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

Women's Rights Women in the Church:

In the Lived Experience of Clare and Francis

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Sessions:

Preface

Clare's Call and Fidelity to Her Vocation

Clare Authored and Held Firm to Her Vocation

Clare and Her Sisters Were Self-governed

Male and Female Equality in Franciscan Beginnings

Rule of St Francis; St. Clare's Form of Life and Rule



Suggestion: This could be used in six
hour and a half sessions.

Each session includes a suggested prayer, input section, process and a suggested closing prayer.

Goal: The participant will ponder segments of the life of Clare as well as the role of women today.

Session 1

Suggested Prayer: God of mercy and goodness, we know the affection you have for us; fill us with a greater love for you that we may proclaim you more boldly before your people and lead them to celebrate your glory. (*Franciscan Morning and Evening Praise*, Franciscan Federation 2009 p870)

Take time to read this section:

Preface

It is a common known fact that we don't see things as they are, we see them as we are.

My lived experience of being a woman and being in relationship with society and the church gives me a lens by which I perceive the realities and experiences of others. In this preface I will take you through a very brief history of growing up in the 1900's, the church's role in my calling to follow Jesus, and then back step to the 1200's where Francis and Clare grew up and answered their call to follow Jesus in relationship to the church.

My experience of being female in a family of five girls and three boys was very positive. Being raised on a farm gave us all experiences of working on the farm as well as doing the house work. Mother was a teacher and Dad was a farmer before marriage. As their children we were praised for working hard, achieving in school, and supporting each other. Education was provided for all siblings. Each person was special and was treated equally. Our relationship with the church was that of mandatory attendance at Mass under the pain of mortal sin, and our religious development gave much attention to mortal and venial sin, heaven, hell and purgatory, with a judging God keeping watch over every action. The catechism gave us all the answers as to who we were and who God was. Memorization gave us our grade in religion. The Mystery of God, the universe, and all that was hidden from our consciousness and understanding was never discussed. God was male and all leaders of the church were male. In family we all had a voice, but in the church women were not allowed to be ordained or to represent the church in any leadership role. At Mass we were referred to as men, brothers and sons. Only male images were used for God.

Faith for me was caught more than taught. Mom gathered her eight children together each evening for prayer. From her we learned about a God of love through Jesus who gave his life for us and taught us how to love one another. She always invited us to remember to say our three Hail Mary's each night before going to bed so that we would know how to answer the call of Jesus to follow him when we grew up. After a devastating hail storm which totally destroyed our corn crop, Dad gathered us together at the dining room table and said God spoke to him that day as he walked the fields where all the stalks were stripped of corn. He said God told him that there was something more important for the Hosch family than Iowa corn. I never forgot that day and the faith that Dad placed in a God that would never be destroyed and would never be the cause of destruction. I came to believe in a God whose love outlasted all evil, hatred, personal weakness and sin. I grew to desire that faith and to tell everyone all about that God of my Dad's and my Mom's faith and gradually mine. I simply wanted to tell people about this loving, forgiving Jesus who loved without exclusion, relating to men and women as equals, because Mom and Dad said so. And they were very credible to me because of how they lived.

I chose to enter the Franciscan community of women who taught me because they, too, were living “out loud” their desire to live a life of love for all people, in simplicity, vowing celibacy, and in obedience to Jesus who had won over their hearts and mine.

Entering the Franciscan community after graduation brought me into the highs and lows of what it meant to follow Jesus in a religious community. In 1953 I entered a loving, prayerful Franciscan community where the sisters were eager to become educated and excel in staffing the community’s hospitals, college, homes for the aging and elementary and secondary schools.

I soon discovered that the influence of the institutional Church had direct authority on how we were to live our lives. Since we are a papal religious community, our Constitutions and all revisions need approval from the male authorities in Rome. In some ways there was a rigidity and strictness to our life when it came to our prayer life, the role of superiors in our life and how we were to dress; and even our choice of ministry and mission was decided for us.

The Council of Vatican II was held in the 1960s and lifted some of this strictness. The documents which emerged from this Council moved us to a new level of being personally involved and responsible for the choices which impacted our lives. We were given broadened educational and ministry opportunities and a spirit of freedom to imagine new ways to serve the poor; and we were given encouragement to move to the margins of society where we pictured Jesus would be if he were walking the earth. The spirit of our Foundress invited us into places where the orphans, the elderly poor and the abused women and children of society were dwelling while at the same time we were educating children, youth and adults. The global community was opening to us, especially in those regions where the basic necessities of life were not available. The community’s blessing went before us. Our spirit of responding to the call of Jesus to live the Gospel way of life as shown to us by Francis and Clare was our 2008 Chapter of Affairs: “In our personal, communal and public life, we commit to ongoing conversion as we deepen our relationship with Mother Earth and Sister Water, stand with persons who are poor, make peace and practice non-violence. This is who we are; this is what the global community can expect of us.”

Our constitutions were revised to depict our lives moving out and collaborating with co-workers in the vineyards of grace. We went out in small groups two by two and at times one by one, forming community with those we worked with and with those served. What was important was the fact that we went out in responding to the call to be disciples of Jesus. Our chapters and gatherings became a spiritual and holy experience of discernment as we based our comings and goings on the charism of our foundress, the Gospel Way of Life, and the Franciscan values of poverty, minority, care of the earth, contemplation and conversion.

New understandings emerged as we gleaned the work of the Spirit in the Council Documents of Vatican II. The Council document The Church as the People of God deepened in us the reality that we are all one body, one body in Christ. The importance of relationships led us to perceive the importance of community which then led us to reflect on the unity of all people. This oneness of all creation is mirrored in our present day as our view expands beyond our earth to the unity of all creation.

In the years following Vatican II change was both difficult and freeing at the same time. The “official” church held on to male dominance in authoritarian structures while religious communities of women authored our

obedience to the call of Jesus and his way of life heard in discernment with our community's elected leaders and with one another. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza in her book Discipleship of Equals describes two opposing models of church in existence.

Patriarchal model of church - The church consists of the laity and the clerical hierarchy. They constitute a social system of male ranks and hierarchies. The Code of Canon Law defines jurisdiction as the "power of ruling" that is validated by sacred orders (Canon 126). This model of the church sustains communal life by control from the top to the bottom. No women were included in authority roles.

The church as the people of God – the church as the pilgrim people of God stands in continuity with Israel and in solidarity with all the peoples of the world. All the baptized constitute church and are empowered and responsible for building up church. Ministry is a function of the whole people of God. Those ministries directed toward the nurturing and "building up" of the faith-community are the prerogative and vocation of all those baptized. Ministry in this model of church has a twofold function: it is outer-directed toward the "world" in proclaiming the gospel and in ministering to those who are weak and powerless. At the same time ministry is inner-directed toward the "church" in nourishing, empowering, enabling, and building up the faith community. Ministry is the calling to everyone and the responsibility of everyone. (pp. 184-185)

Since Vatican II Religious communities of women and lay women have been moving toward ministry as "power for" service rather than "power over." No longer accepting a second class label because of our femininity, sisters often find themselves ministering along side of the institutional church while caring for the poor and marginalized as their charism leads them to do. All are educated in spirituality, theology, Scripture, Franciscan values, and in the profession of their choice. Persons and institutions that do not recognize the gift of the Spirit in those living out the beatitudes of Jesus should not have power over these works of mercy or the people performing them. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life.

Silent time for process:

How was your faith formed in your early years?

What has been your experience of church before and /or after Vatican II? If you were born after Vatican II, what is your impression of Vatican II and its impact on you and the Church? If you were born before Vatican II, what do you perceive its impact on you and the church?

Imagine a church community honoring the Vatican II document Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Chapter II, entitled "The People of God," which reinstates the law of Jesus to love others as Jesus loves us. Describe it.

Describe the beginning of your faith journey to answer the call to follow Jesus.

What is the "Jesus Way" that you are being called to and/or responding to in your life at this time?

How will being a follower of Francis and Clare help you in being faithful to this call?

What are your sources of inspiration as you journey through life?

Spend some time in conversation.

(You are invited to spend time with another process or two till the group meets again.)

Closing Prayer: One person prays the first section of each intercessions; all respond with the *italic print*.

From you come all things desirable, O God, Holy One. With eagerness we pray:

You give us life and light each day. *Make us truly grateful for your gifts.*

You lead your church to observe your commandments. *May we always be faithful to your law of love.*

You nourish your people at the banquet of your Word and Eucharist. *Strengthened by this holy food, may we follow you in joy and gladness.*

Add your own intentions if you desire

May God bless us and keep us.

May God's face shine upon us and be gracious to us.

May God look upon us with kindness and give us peace.

(Franciscan Morning and Evening Praise p 871)

Session 2

Suggested Prayer: O God, in your incarnate Word you have come to make a dwelling place within us. May we find your presence in ourselves, in our neighbors, and in all creation. May we always give you praise and thanks. We ask this through Jesus, who lives and rules with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen. (Adapted from *Franciscan Morning and Evening Praise* Franciscan Federation 2009 p 882)

Share the previous session's processes.

Take time to read this section:

Clare's Call and Fidelity to Her Vocation in Her Early Years

Clare was formed by her mother, Ortolana, in a household of women who prayed together, gave alms and food to the poor and hungry of Assisi. She was known to be held in high regard for her spiritual qualities. Her "form of life" was evolving as she grew up with a desire for celibacy while rejecting the arranged marriages planned for her. She was influenced by the teachings and life of poverty which Francis was living.

Clare's first encounters with Francis (1211-1212) are described in the Acts of the Process of Canonization.

Clare's sister, Beatrice, shares that Francis heard of Clare before their first meeting. (Proc XII: 2) "He actively sought and pursued conversations with Clare." Lady Bona testified under oath that she knew Clare and had stayed with her while Clare was in her father's house. "She accompanied Clare many times on her visits to Francis saying that she went secretly as not to be seen by her parents." (Proc XVII 3) "Asked what Saint Francis said to Clare, she replied he always preached to her about converting to Jesus Christ." (Proc XVII: 3)

With no formal schooling she was not overly influenced by the theories of the church fathers depicting the inferior status of women. In Clare's heart she wanted to be part of the penitential movement as it was being lived by Francis and his brothers. One could say that she CAUGHT the spirit of Francis. Her deep desire to live a life of poverty, celibacy and prayer brought her to follow her desires. On that special Palm Sunday in 1212 she broke free of all that held her back and fled to her new life "TO BE POOR LIKE THE POOR JESUS". Never mind that she didn't have a community to enter. In fact, she never intended to found a community (an Order). She joined the brothers on that Palm Sunday. Yes, she joined the brothers! They then realized that culturally that would not be possible, so other arrangements were made while they discerned what was next for Clare.

Though it is likely that Francis, Clare and Bishop Guido (Bishop of Assisi) had discussed Clare's intentions, it is also likely that much was left unplanned. Some scholars suggest that Francis never really considered Clare to be a full participant in the brotherhood; that he felt his responsibility was completed once he received Clare into the penitent movement. This results in serious ambivalence regarding Clare and her sisters in the future. As time went on after the death of Francis, the Franciscan men, like members of other male Orders to which

women religious were at least loosely attached, petitioned popes to be relieved of any responsibility for women's branches of their Orders. It is interesting to note that Bonaventure does not even mention Clare in his Major Life of St. Francis.

Clare's one desire was to make a decision for her own life as she felt called by Jesus and inspired by Francis. It was when other women desired to follow Clare that she was called upon to formalize her Way of Life as required by the church.

Clare emerges as one who accepted the charism of Francis, expressed it in her unique feminine way, and, at a period of medieval history in which the role of women was also undergoing change, shattered many of the traditional religious stereotypes.

...Clare was a strong, thoroughly convinced and heroic woman who would not let the purity of Francis's vision die despite the enormous forces discouraging her. (CAED 14)

It is noted that Francis kept an eye on Clare and the women who came to join her. When she portrayed no fear of poverty, hard work, trial or shame, or contempt of the world, he provided them with a "form of life" which would connect and relate the "Poor Ladies" to Francis and his brothers.

Filled with respect and admiration and kinship with how the women were living the Gospel way of life, and desiring to bond the male and female communities together in one spirit, Francis was inspired by their faithfulness:

Because by divine inspiration you have made yourselves daughters and handmaids of the most High, most exalted King, the heavenly Father, and have taken the Holy Spirit as your spouse, choosing to live according to the perfection of the holy Gospel. I resolve and promise for myself and for my brothers always to have the same loving care and special solicitude for you as for them. (CAED 16)

During the 27 years between the death of Francis and her own, she became the living witness who strongly shaped the consciousness of the family drawn to the Gospel understanding of Francis and Clare, and during that period, unwittingly became a creative innovator of the religious life of the Church (CAED 14)

¹ Silent time for process:

Have you ever taken a step in a direction that you felt God leading, only to find yourself in a completely different situation than you expected? In retrospect, how did you come to understand what happened? What were the influences impacting your journey? Describe your feelings around that experience?

What is the focus of your life? How is it the same and different from Clare's calling?

Francis became a mentor for Clare as she was discerning how to live her life. Who are your mentors in your call to follow Jesus?

Clare valued Lady Poverty as central to her life. Prayer, care for the poor and celibacy were also central in her life. Describe those virtues which you choose to be your sources of inspiration and grace.

What actions flow out of your values?

Activity: Write a journal entry of your growing up years and adult experiences which brought you to this time where your passion to follow Jesus as modeled by Francis and Clare is ever growing stronger and deeper within you.

Spend some time in shared conversation

(You are invited to spend time with another process or two till the group meets again.)

Suggested Prayer:

O God, in you we discover our true selves. In this light we pray:

In the spirit of poverty, *may we discern your will in the depths of our heart.*

In the spirit of love, *may we experience your ever-present grace in all the events of our lives.*

In the spirit of minority, *may we learn to be simple and subject to all.*

In the spirit of faithfulness, *may we honor your holy activity in our lives.*

(Franciscan Morning and Evening Praise p 936)

Add your own intentions if you desire

May God bless us and keep us.

May God's face shine upon us and be gracious to us.

May God look upon us with kindness and give us peace.

(Franciscan Morning and Evening Praise p 871)

Session 3

Suggested Prayer: O God, like our sister Clare, we yearn for you with all our heart. It is in desiring you that we experience your overwhelming love, which transforms us into the loving creatures that you yourself desire. We pray this through Jesus, our Brother. Amen.

Share the previous session's processes

Take time to read this section:

Clare Authored and Held Firm to Her Own Vocation Through the Years

Although Clare had and valued a strong relationship to the hierarchical Church, especially in the sacrament of Eucharist, she resolutely followed her own vocation and vision even amid differences with Popes, Cardinals, and Bishops. She did not allow herself or her sisters to be dominated by the patriarchy and hierarchy of the church in her time. Francis encouraged Clare to remain strong even though her vision would most likely be tested over and over again in the years ahead. He wrote the following advice to Clare and her sisters shortly before his death.

I, little brother Francis, wish to follow the life and poverty of our Most High Lord Jesus Christ and of His most holy Mother and to persevere in this until the end; And I ask you, my ladies, and I give you my advice that you live always in this most holy life and poverty. And keep careful watch that you never depart from this by reason of the teaching or advice of anyone. (CAED 16)

Clare fostered this independent spirit in her communication with Agnes of Prague. Agnes was a Princess of Bohemia who was promised as a bride in an arranged marriage. Agnes renounced marriage, used her wealth to establish a hospice for the needy of Prague, built a monastery and chose to enter it with seven other noble women. She established the Order of St. Damien in Prague. In her second letter to Agnes, Clare wrote:

In all of this, follow the counsel of our venerable father, our Brother Elias, the Minister General, that you may walk more securely in the way of the commands of the Lord. Prize it beyond the advice of the others and cherish it as dearer to you than any gift. If anyone has said anything else to you or suggested any other thing to you that might hinder your perfection or that would seem contrary to your divine vocation, even though you must respect him, do not follow his counsel. (2Lag 15-17)

Living in a poor manner, as did the poor Christ and his poor Mother, was essential to Clare. It was her chosen way to become one with Jesus. Poverty was at the center of her life. After Clare's rejection of social affluence and privilege in order to live in poverty she struggled against ecclesial power that sought to guarantee the economic security and privileges of medieval monasteries. Margaret Carney explains that "when women had limited possibilities for marriage or independent economic existence their families set them up within monasteries which became extensions of family identity, financially secured by the family, and controlled by their patrons in order to conserve the interests of the family". (p.110)

In 1216 Pope Innocent III helped Clare to create an entirely new way of monastic life for women. Witnessing Clare's deep desire to own nothing, to appropriate nothing for herself, and to turn her back on temporal security, he granted her the PRIVILEGE OF POVERTY. This privilege granted Clare and those who would join her the right to live without property, which took away their assurance of an income or livelihood. The fact that the Privilege was written in Pope Innocent III's own hand shows how extraordinary this exception was for Clare. But then later their Cardinal Protector, Cardinal Hugolino, rescinded the Privilege of Poverty and granted the Poor Ladies the right to possess property in order to assure stability and to guarantee housing and food to eat.

Clare's determination to hold on to what was at the very center of her vision did not bend to the regulations imposed upon her in a manipulative move to bring about Clare's obedient response.

"...she (Clare) especially had a great love of poverty. Neither Pope Gregory IX nor the Bishop of Ostia could ever make her consent to receive any possessions." (PC2:22)

Cardinal Hugolino also established the policy that each group of women was to have a permanent means of income – a patrimony of dowry which would be sufficient for the support of the community. Clare refused this income. When Clare was threatened even more by church authorities, Pope Gregory IX tried to persuade her to accept a gift of property from him for her safety and security. With a firm spirit Clare did not abide by these two rulings:

...she resisted with a very strong spirit and would in no way acquiesce. To this the Pope replied: 'If you fear for your vow, we absolve you from it.' 'Holy Father' she said, 'I will never in any way wish to be absolved from the following of Christ.' (LCl X: 13-14)

Clare's spirituality met opposition once again by Pope Gregory IX. In his authority style of "power over" he issued a papal bull (a decree or proclamation of action) in 1230 removing the friar chaplains from San Damiano. This was a tragic move on the part of the Pope as Clare treasured the teachings and homilies of the gifted speakers. Pope Gregory IX took away the two things at the heart of Clare's vision for her, namely, the imitation of Jesus in his poverty and the outreach ministry of Francis and his brothers for Clare and her sisters. It would seem that the Pope used his position and clout as power to manipulate Clare's obedience.

Clare always found a way to be in union with God's ways within her. She came back with a power move which she had, and that was the power over her body. Clare, in fact, went on a hunger strike in opposition to the Pope's actions. It worked. In the end the Pope relented. Clare could then position herself as one who had

power to hold on to her vision of being poor as the poor Christ and in remaining spiritually connected to Francis and the brothers. The official sources explain it thus:

In response Clare refused the services of the friars who begged bread for them; in effect she went on a hunger strike! The pious mother, sorrowing that her sisters would more rarely have the food of sacred teaching, sighed: 'Let him now take away from us all the brothers since he has taken away those who provide us with the food that is vital.'

At once she sent back to the minister all the brothers, not wanting to have the questors (beggar friars) who acquired corporal bread when they could not have the questors for spiritual bread. When Pope Gregory heard this, he immediately mitigated the prohibition into the hands of the general minister." (LCI XXIV 7-10}

Clare acted upon the authority of her inner truth. She forged a way for all women and men to live in right relationship with the church. She showed us the way to "Divine Intimacy," which is secondary to no established religion or its representatives.

Silent time for process:

Clare held on to hope in the midst of trials and tribulations. She never faltered to live out of her core values. Ponder times when you had to stand firm to what you believed. Tell your story.

What helped you to hold firm when your values/truths were being threatened?

Go into your inner garden and take a look at what you believe and what actions follow upon your basic beliefs. Choose one noun and one adjective to describe your image of God, your image of self, and your image of the world. How do these images of yours help direct your life?

Do the same for Clare. Describe with an adjective and a noun Clare's God image, self image, and world image. How did these images help direct Clare's life?

(Suggested reading for this process is from Richard Rohr's book titled Hope against Darkness, The Transforming Vision of Saint Francis in an Age of Anxiety Chapter 8. "What is Your Window on Reality?")

Write a support letter to Clare as she is going through her struggle to hold on to her dream and to live it out in the only way she can envision herself doing so. Have Clare write a support letter to you as you pursue your dreams for your life in the midst of difficulty, weakness, and temptation to let it go.

In some creative way express your response to Clare: a poem, a song, dramatic reading, movement, dance, rap, drumbeat, dialogue, a personal psalm, painting,

Spend some time in shared conversation.

(You are invited to spend time with another process or two till the group meets again.)

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Suggested Prayer: Loving gracious God, be with us as we gaze upon you and consider your desires for us, contemplate your presence and imitate you in all that we are. Thank you for your presence within us and among us, and the ways you surround us. Amen.

Session 4

Suggested Prayer: O God, you have made us members of the body of Christ on earth. Enable us to faithfully contemplate the beauty and dignity of our calling and surrender to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in all things. Amen (Franciscan Morning and Evening Praise p. 1125)

Share the previous session's processes

Take time to read this section:

Clare and Her Sisters Were Self-Governed

Clare and her sisters were self-governing, not dependent on the friars for decisions of the sisters' form of life. Her governance was collegial. Apparently from 1212-1215 the sisters lived without an elected or appointed leader. She saw authority as power "with" rather than power "over" which is indicative of servant leadership. A change in her determination to be "least" took more than ordinary persuasion by Francis. It is reported that he prayed before asking her to accept the position as abbess. Upon the insistence of the church that the community of the Poor Clares needed to appoint an abbess, Clare finally accepted this role.

..." three years after Lady Clare had been in the Order, at the prayers and insistence of Francis, who almost forced her, she accepted the direction and government of the sisters)PC1:6)

Clare's sister Beatrice testified that she modeled an inclusive servant leadership indicative of our present time.

Clare conducted herself in the direction of the sisters in "a holy and prudent way." Her holiness existed in her virginity, humility, patience, and kindness; in the necessary correction and sweet admonition of her sisters; in the continuous application to her prayer and contemplation, abstinence and fasting; in the disregard of herself and in the fervor of her love of God. (PC12:6)

Clare describes the role of abbess in her Form of Life which respects the wisdom of every sister whose opinion is sought and received. Consensus was Clare's style of leadership:

Let her consult with all her sisters concerning whatever concerns the welfare and good of the monastery, for the Lord frequently reveals what is better to the youngest. (FLC14:18)

Let all who hold offices in the monastery be selected by the common consent of all the sisters. (FLC14:22)

In her Form of Life Clare states that for the election of an abbess:

The Minister General or Provincial of the Lesser Brothers is to be invited, BUT his role is “through the Word of God, let him dispose them (these sisters) to perfect harmony and the common good in the election to be held.” (FLC14:2-3)

However, Clare does not indicate this person’s right to confirm the election – as Hugolino did in his Rule for Religious Orders existing at that time. The election was confirmed by the sisters themselves.

Clare’s spirit of collegial decision-making and the inclusivity of all the sisters in making important decisions came through in a Chapter Mandate of 1238, which endorsed a document selling property of the monastery to the church of San Rufino. The document was signed by all 50 sisters at San Damiano. (See CAED, p. 429-430)

Sister Margaret Carney, in her book The First Franciscan Woman points out that the strict enclosure of religious women forced them to create extern sisters which created a situation of inequality of members. This condition required some dependence upon male communities for chaplains or procurators, “with the usual result that autonomy and the ability to conduct the business of one’s institution were often sacrificed by women to male counterparts out of necessity.” (p. 188)

She goes on to state that “women also suffered from the repetitious warnings, sermons, and treatises dealing with the erroneous perceptions that women were ontologically insufficient and psychologically unstable which tainted Christian theology and ecclesial praxis.” (p. 188) This perception has overshadowed many of the achievements of the Catholic tradition regarding the dignity of woman. Like Clare, religious communities of women today are still experiencing these views which are present in the tensions of women’s role in the church and its ministries in the present time.

Sister Ingrid Peterson in her book Clare of Assisi describes the struggle women faced just because of the male understandings of woman’s body. Tertullian, followed by Thomas Aquinas and the fourth and fifth century theologians authored some of the worst female- bashing writings which seep through to the present day. She quotes Tertullian, “You are the gate of the devil, the traitor of the tree, the first deserter of Divine Law; you are she who enticed the one whom the devil dare not approach; you broke so easily the image of God, man, on account of the death you deserved, even the Son of God had to die.” Thomas Aquinas, took up the negative teaching of the church fathers, insisting that women be treated according to their nature, which is morally, spiritually, intellectually, and physically inferior. (Pp.216-217) St. Augustine believed that a woman is a misconception.

Knowing that this is only a sampling of the thinking that was prevalent makes Clare’s belief that she was a daughter of God and was called by God to be the recipient of extraordinary grace to live a Gospel way of life brings much light upon her strength to believe in her own person and to grow in love of the God who loves her.

Silent time for process:

Describe times when you were not included when important decisions were made that impacted your life?
What feelings surfaced as a result of this?

Did you ever have the experience of being consulted or invited to become a member of a group where your opinion was heard and respected? Share your feelings about your experience.

What tensions are you feeling as a woman or as a man in society and the church?

What are some examples of unjust and unequal treatment of women happening in today's society and church? How are you responding as a woman/man to such unequal treatment?

What is Clare's message to women and men today? What is Francis' message for men and women today?

How is the world better for Clare and Francis having lived?

Spend some time in shared conversation.

(You are invited to spend time with another process or two till the group meets again.)

Suggested Prayer: Most High, glorious God, may the example of Clare of Assisi impel us to love you with our whole heart and to seek your will in all the events of our lives. May her serene poverty remind us of who we are and who you are that we might surrender our lives to you with complete trust. We ask this through Jesus, our brother. Amen. (Franciscan Morning and Evening Praise p. 1127)

Session 5

Suggested Prayer: O God, you have made all creation a hymn of praise to you. May our lives reflect that harmony and give you glory. Amen (Franciscan Morning and Evening Praise p. 1129)

Share the previous session's processes.

Take time to read this section:

Male and Female Equality in Franciscan Beginnings

The ideal monastic women of Clare's time were submissive, secluded, and followed a rule under the control of the church. Clare, however, saw herself and her sisters as full disciples of the Gospel with an evangelical vocation. She had no inferior self-image as a woman. Nothing could separate her from the love of God as shown through Jesus. Her severe fasting practices and bodily penances were ministrations of love rather than unworthiness.

To use the words of the Apostle himself in their proper sense, I judge you to be a co-worker of God and a support for the weak members of His ineffable Body. (3 LAg 8)

Other people saw the sisters and brothers as equals and as apostolic from their earliest beginnings.

The "Lesser Brothers" (not as great as others) and "Lesser Sisters" work in the cities and villages by day and return to their hermitage or solitary place to devote themselves to contemplation... They live according to the form of the primitive church, a community of believers of one heart and one mind. They are grieved that they are honored by both clergy and laity more than they would wish." (Letter of Jacques de Vitry (1216, p. 428 in FAED, Vol. 1)

Francis related to Clare and her sisters as equals and capable of the rigorous vocation that was theirs. He encouraged their independence, respected their gifts, and was graced by their tremendous love of Jesus. He saw the vocation and rights of the sisters and brothers as equal.

Climbing the wall of the church, he (Francis) shouted in French to some poor people who were standing nearby: 'Come and help me in the work of the monastery of San Damiano, because there will as yet be ladies here who will glorify our heavenly Father throughout His holy, universal Church by their celebrated manner of life.'" (TestC I 12-14)

When blessed Francis saw, however, that, although we were physically weak and frail, we did not shirk deprivation, poverty, hard work, trial, or the shame or contempt of the world – rather, we considered them as great delights, as he had frequently examined us according to

the example of the saints and his brothers, he greatly rejoiced in the Lord. And moved by pity for us, he bound himself, both personally and through his religion, always to have the same loving care and special solicitude for us as for his own brothers.” (TestCl 27-29)

When the Blessed Father saw we had no fear of poverty, hard work, trial, shame or contempt of the world, but, instead, we held them as great delights, moved by piety he wrote a form of life for us as follows... ‘I resolve and promise for myself and for my brothers always to have the same loving care and special solicitude for you as for them.’ As long as he lived he diligently fulfilled this and wished that it always be fulfilled by the brothers. (FLC 16:2-4)

...he commanded it to be carried out without fail always, saying that one and the same spirit had led the brothers and those little poor ladies out of this world. (2C204)

After he (Francis) composed the Praises of the Lord for his creatures, he also composed some holy words with chant for the greater consolation of the Poor Ladies of the Monastery of San Damiano. He wanted to do this because... their conversion and manner of living is the glory and edification not only of the religion of the brothers, whose little plant they are, but also to the entire Church of God. Therefore, since blessed Francis knew that from the beginning of their conversion they had led, and were still leading, a strict and poor life by free choice and by necessity, his spirit was always moved to piety for them. (AC85)

Clare and Francis chose to live outside the walls of the city of Assisi, on the margins, at the edge, in order to be in solidarity with the poor. Living with the poor and as a poor person, Francis and Clare made a strong statement about the economic inequity of society which elevated the rich, used the poor, and then discarded them when they were no longer useful. Francis and Clare came from noble families and chose to live lives of poverty and simplicity, in humility, in imitation of Jesus. Francis elevated the calling of women to represent Jesus. Clare put herself on an equal level with men by witnessing that both males and females are called equally to live in pursuit of the Divine who loves all equally and lovingly..

Not only society, but the Church, promulgated the inequality of rich and poor and also between men and women. Because of the existing inequalities perceived of men and women, bringing Clare and those first sisters to San Damiano can be seen as a deeper level of rebuilding the church that Francis had been commissioned to do at that church earlier. Francis and Clare ushered in a renewed spirit of deep respect for men and women to live and work together, honoring each person’s unique gifts of the spirit, receiving the graces of God’s love that each manifested in how they lived, loved, and served their God, and how each person’s calling moved each to carry their cross and live a life of penance as no other in imitation of the poor Jesus.

Peterson writes that “In a patriarchy where God was seen as masculine, Clare saw humanity as feminine, as did many of the medieval mystics. Clare’s expressions are particularly feminine in the way she envisions Mary holding Jesus in the cloister of her womb and then again on her virginal lap. Contrary to the negative messages of medieval society about women, Clare took her femininity to mean a privileged place before God.” (Pp.22-23)

Silent time for process:

Like Francis and Clare, we struggle with living into an identity of women and men created equal in the heart of our creator. What is your truth in living as a woman or as a man in a society and church that withholds equality from women?

Which of the following words resonate with you in your struggle for equality for all? Explain.

Changing, growing, questioning, risking, defending, disillusionment, rearranging, addressing, creative, grace, challenging, rethinking, reimagining, courage, struggle, hope, faith, confidence, forgiveness, love, fear, identity, assertive, pioneer, quiet, giving up, searching, questing, freedom, responsible, defenseless, oneness. Are there any other words that come to mind for you?

Write your own magnificat, praising God for being a woman or a man, including how you are living out your calling to live the Jesus way as a woman or as a man in family, church, and society.

Write a Declaration of Equality to society, church, and/or to a person you know who needs to hear the message.

As a man, how do you support women within the church? As a woman how do you support women in the church?

Is there a place in the church for men and women to be equal?

What would the Church have to lose if they acknowledged the equality of women and men?

What would the Church gain?

Spend some time in shared conversation

(You are invited to spend time with another process or two till the group meets again.)

Suggested Prayer: O God, you inspired Clare to follow the vision of Francis and made her a perfect example of poverty of spirit. And so we prayer:

Clare left all her possessions and the comfort of her home in order to possess you alone. May we follow this gospel call with the same generosity of spirit.

Clare experienced the freedom of Holy poverty. May we not be preoccupied with possessions but come to know the freedom of true simplicity.

Clare called her sisters to loving relationships in gospel community. ***May we witness to this same divine character by the ways we live with one another.***

If you so desire, add your own intentions.

Close with “Glory be to the Creator, and to the Redeemer and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen

Session 6

Suggested Prayer: O God, give us the grace to walk worthy of the vocation to which you have called us and to observe faithfully the holy gospel of our brother Jesus the Christ. Amen

Share the previous session's processes.

Take time to read this section:

Rule of St. Francis; St. Clare's Form of Life and Rule

Both Clare and Francis were focused on living their lives as followers of Jesus as described in the Gospels. Francis, in his attempt to repair the Church, chose no excuses to live other than in imitation of Jesus. The Church was falling down as he experienced it in his father's thirst for money and his unjust relationship with the poor. He spoke to the sin of the church and society which exploited power, position, material possessions, war, enslaving and then discarding the poor, living for pleasure no matter the cost.

He advocated humility, love, peace, the Eucharist and the cross, contemplation, living as minors in humility, with forgiveness and penance. Clare gleaned the spirit that fed Francis and followed the charism that took her to leaving family and possessions and live in that same spirit which was directing her to live her life of total fidelity to the Gospel as a woman could do.

Both began their lifestyle with the freedom of the children of God. However, they were members of a Church which required them to write down a rule by which they were to describe how they were to live. In order to have their communities blessed by the Church they needed to meet this requirement. Both Francis and Clare had difficulty in writing down what was so internal to their spirit.

Francis wrote a simple rule, including quotes from the Gospel, with every effort to choose the words that captured the spirit of his calling. Because his community was increasing at a rapid pace, he needed what he had written to be approved by Pope Innocent III. He took eleven brothers with him to Rome to seek the approval of his rule. He first saw one of the Cardinal Bishops who suggested that he join the eremitical or monastic life. Francis persisted in his pursuit and was finally given a hearing by the Pope, who upon taking in the spirit of Francis gave confirmation of their rule along with the mandate to continue preaching penance. This confirmation was made public to the church at large.

The following brief history is gleaned from Ingrid Peterson in her book, *Clare of Assisi*, pp.319-339

From 1212 until 1215 Clare and the Poor Ladies lived under the brief and simple Form of Life which was given to them by Francis. In 1215 Clare's community and all other foundations of women were required to live under the approved rule of St. Benedict, imposed upon all communities by Pope Innocent III. Clare never wavered in her determination to request that their "Privilege of Poverty" become a part of the rule lived by

the Poor Ladies of San Damiano. This request was granted by Pope Innocent III in 1216. Unlike the other communities the Privilege of Poverty permitted the Poor ladies of San Damiano to live without property.

Following this in 1219, the new Pope Honorius III appointed Cardinal Hugolino to organize the movement of the Poor Ladies, requiring them to profess the Rule of St. Benedict as their Form of Life. This strict rule remained in effect for 34 years up to 1253. Clare labored the rest of her life to change this. At the age of 55 she set out to write her own rule. She was the first woman to write a rule for a community of religious sisters. She wrote a rule inclusive of poverty, humility, love, prayer and fasting, while incorporating parts of the rule of Francis, St. Benedict, Cardinal Hugolino and Pope Innocent IV. Even though her rule was submitted to the Pope it had never been approved.

It wasn't until the year 1253, the day before her death, that Clare requested once again, the approval of her rule. In haste her rule was signed by Pope Innocent IV, rushed to her bedside, and given to her. It is noted that she kissed it over and over before her death the following day.

Margaret Carney highlights the significance of Clare's work with her formulation of the rule: "...Clare shared authentically and originally in the charism of Francis. The feminine incarnation of the Franciscan evangelical life emerges in Clare not only as a model for the inspiration of Franciscan women ...but also to the fact that the charism of the Franciscan vocation is given by the Holy Spirit equally to women throughout the history of the Orders." (pp. 244-245)

Clare's efforts of reformulation of existing rules in order to serve her and community and preserve the unique spirit of their vocation shows much fortitude and self-determination to maintain what was essential in her desire to secure a way of life for her sisters in the future. She never faltered in her pursuit of the poor Jesus as she had come to know him.

In a letter to Agnes, Clare places her struggles of being a woman within the Church in the placement of the cross being at the center of her self-definition. She writes to Agnes in this context:

***...What you hold, may you hold,
What you do may you do and not stop.
But with swift pace, light step, unswerving feet,
so that even your steps stir up no dust,
may you go forward
securely, joyfully, and swiftly,
on the path of prudent happiness... (2LAg11-13)***

***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 21-22).***

In her third letter to Agnes, Clare rises above the turmoil which others placed in her way as she "encourages Agnes to let go of her human nature in order to melt into the nature of God." (Peterson p.281)

**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! (3LAg 12-13)**

Silent time for process:

How are you accepting your inner authority to be in communion with God?

Describe the Way of the Cross in taking up life's challenges in living the Franciscan Way? What fuzzy thinking must change for you to feel differently and to act accordingly? What would have to change if you grew in walking the Way of Francis and Clare? What are some of your short and long-range goals?

Mandala Drawing: Take some time to quiet yourself. Turn on some meditative music. Attend to what you are feeling. Where are your thoughts, feelings, leading you? Allow your own rule of life to emerge. Open your eyes and color your inner self. Draw a circle and with colored pencils, paint, crayons, work outward from the center, allow yourself to unfold.

Complete 20 sentences beginning with: I am _____. Use metaphors if that helps you. Example: (I am like the rising sun, bringing light to those who are crushed down and abused.)

Meditation: Meditate on the passages of Scripture that you think inspired Francis and Clare to believe they were chosen and loved by Jesus to sell what they have and follow him.

Read the Rule of St. Francis and the Rule of St. Clare. Select a passage from each which you will commit yourself to as you move into the future. Share these in a joint group commitment session.

Compose your own rule of life. Share with your group.

Spend some time in shared conversation

**(You are invited to spend time with another process or two till the group meets again.
Your group may want to meet again just to reflect on the processes.)**

Prayer:

We bless you, O Lord our God, living and true, as we pray:

Make us humble of heart. ***Help us to serve one another in imitation of Christ.***

You know the inequities of human systems. *Teach us how to meet the needs of those who labor, are poor, voiceless, and vulnerable.*

You sent Jesus to reconcile all people to you, a loving God. *Give us courage to work toward achieving this reconciliation.*

You have given us life. *Inspire us to use it to enhance the lives of others.*

You may add you own intention...

Close with quote on page I9 2Lag11-13

Sources:

Abbreviations: CAED=Clare of Assisi Early Documents; FAED=Francis of Assisi Early Documents; FLC1= Clare's Form of Life; TestCL=Testament of Clare; PC=Process of Canonization; LC1=Legend of Clare; AC= Assisi Compilation; LAg=Letter to Agnes; 2C=Celano's 2nd Life of St. Francis

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