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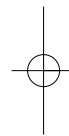
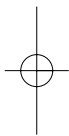
CLARE OF ASSISI AND OF TODAY

**A HEART SEDUCED
AND ENRAPTURED BY THE LORD**

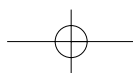
***On the occasion of the
750th Anniversary
of the death of St. Clare
and of the approval of her Rule***

***Letter of the Minister General
of the Order of Friars Minor
on the feast of St. Clare of Assisi***

Rome 2004



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Dear Poor Clare Sisters
 dear Friars Minor:
 I wish you abundance of health and peace
 in the Lord (cf. *5LtCl* 1).

Thanksgiving

With St. Clare, "I give thanks to the Giver of grace from Whom, we believe, every good and perfect gift proceeds, because He has adorned you with such splendours of virtue and signed you with such marks of perfection" (*2LtCl* 3); and "I rejoice and exult in the Lord" (*Hab* 3,18) for "the fame of your holy conduct and irreproachable life" (*1LtCl* 3).

I give thanks to the Lord for the faithfulness of so many Sisters and Brothers who, like a lamp placed on a stand, give light to the whole house and to all who approach them. I give thanks to the Lord for the generosity of so many Sisters and Brothers who, from the cloister of silence or from the cloister of the world, give themselves without selfish pretensions to the building of the Kingdom. I give thanks to the Lord for so many Sisters and Brothers who, even in the midst of many difficulties, give joyful testimony to the beauty of the discipleship of the poor and crucified Jesus Christ. I give thanks to Him from whom "all that is good, everything that is perfect" comes (*Jm* 1,17), for the Sisters and Brothers who courageously walk the paths of virtue (cf. *5LtCl* 3).

The occasion of the letter

Today, when the Church remembers the passing of Sister Clare, we bring to a close the jubilee celebrations which, because of the 750th Anniversary of her death and the approval of her *Rule*, have been held wherever the Friars Minor and Poor Clares live.

For that reason, I wish to manifest sincerely the love that animates me internally (cf. *TestCl*

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18) towards you, each and every one of the Poor Clares, spread throughout the east and the west. I write to you, in fact, moved by the great love that I profess for you as my most beloved Sisters in Christ who “became the way” (*TestCl* 2) for us and in Francis, “our most blessed father” (cf. *TestCl* 14). I also write to you moved by the responsibility that falls to me from the promise of Francis (cf. *FLCl* 2; *TestCl* 8) and of the express will of Clare (cf. *TestCl* 14).

At the same time that I am writing to the Sisters, I also write to you, my dear Brothers. Clare, being the most faithful disciple and follower of Francis, his spiritual inheritor, his best and most loyal interpreter, and having lived the Franciscan vocation fully, the “Little Plant of Francis” is also indispensable to us Friars Minor in order to know Francis, to re-read and understand, in all its depth, the message and work of the “Poverello”.

Between you, Poor Clare Sisters, and us, Friars Minor, there is a deep and indissoluble charismatic communion, a real and beautiful complementarity. For that reason, the happy occasion that the celebration of the double Clarean jubilees offers us is not only a motive for joy and a time of grace for deepening our knowledge of Clare for us, beloved Sisters, but also for all of us who have made ours the proposal of Clare to follow Jesus Christ in the way that our father Francis drew up for us.

The reflections that follow, based mainly on the writings of Clare and Francis, have the single purpose of reminding us of our “proposal” (*2LtCl* 11) so that, “with swift pace, light step” (*2LtCl* 12), without allowing ourselves to be overwhelmed by “either bitterness or cloud of sadness” (*3LtCl* 11) we may “walk more securely in the way of the commands of the Lord” (*2LtCl* 15).

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Clare, “the Little Plant” of Francis (TestCl 11)

The Spirit of the Lord raised up Clare together with Francis. Since then, as John Paul II stated, it is not possible to separate these “two phenomena”, these “two legends”, these “two names”.

Francis is, for Clare and her Sisters: the precursor who points out the way, the “founder, planter and helper” (*TestCl* 14) who is solicitous in cultivating them, in word and deed, as his little plants (cf. *TestCl* 14); “pillar of strength and, after God, our one consolation and support” (*TestCl* 11). It is very significant that, on speaking of her vocation in the *Testament*, Clare refers constantly to Francis.

Clare, in turn, is for Francis: adviser and light in discerning the will of the Lord in his moments of doubt (cf. *LMj* 12,2) and always a “helpmate” to him (*Gn* 2,20). It is also significant that, in times of discouragement and darkness, Francis returned to San Damiano to seek, together with Clare, the consolation he needed.

From Francis, Clare received God, received the affection and the push to launch out into living the Gospel in its depths with irrevocable decision (cf. *TestCl* 2). From Clare, Francis received the enlightenment of the Lord. Clare is a reflection of Francis in whom she is seen as in a mirror (cf. *Proc* 3, 29). The face of Francis, in turn, is illuminated by the purity and poverty of Clare. Clare loved Francis tenderly. On her part, Clare won Francis to the extent of becoming an image of Mary for him through her radicalism, her unconditional trust in God, her frailty which was not lacking in strength, her loyalty and fidelity.

One desire alone burned in Clare: To live the Gospel after the example of Francis. To do so, she nourished herself from the same wisdom and breathed the same gospel freshness

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as the Poverello. Having discovered in Francis a “true lover and imitator” of the Son of God (*TestCl* 2), Clare loved him, she entrusted and joined herself to him in order to live his same gospel experience. Therefore, the Rule is the same, “to observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” (*2R* 1,1; *RCl* 1,3), and the mission is the same, to rebuild the Church (cf. *2Cel* 10.204).

In this way, Clare and Francis carried out one of the most genial synthesis in the history of the Church: the synthesis between the silence that listens and the word that announces, between the aloneness that adores in the cloister and the presence that announces in itinerancy. Since “the most high heavenly Father” enlightened the heart of Clare (*TestCl* 7) and showed her and her Sisters the way (cf. *TestCl* 2), and since “the poor Lady” promised him obedience (cf. *RCl* 1,4-5; 6,1), the single Franciscan inspiration is articulated thus in two complementary dimensions: the contemplative, of openness to the Word, and the active, of witness to the Word. They are the two dimensions of love which is, at one and the same time, contemplative and active.

In order for this union, profoundly human and charismatic at the same time, full of both familiarity and respect, not to become reduced in time, and conscious that “the same Spirit had lead the Friars and Poor Clares out of this world” (*2Cel* 204), Francis promised Clare and her Sisters “to always give them loving care and special solicitude” (*FLCl* 2) “through himself and his Order” (*TestCl* 8). On her part, Clare promised, for herself and her Sisters, obedience to Francis and his successors” (cf. *RCl* 1,4).

In the light of that said, it is necessary that both the Friars and the Sisters ask ourselves: How do we live our charismatic complementarity? How do we Friars respond to the promise made by Francis to spiritually accompany the Sisters? How do the Sisters live all that

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Clare wanted to express through obedience to Francis and his successors? What consequences, including those of a juridical nature, should we draw from it? Would it not be that the Lord is asking us for some significant changes that would lead us to live a greater communion, not only affective, but also effective?

Sisters, this is my profound conviction: We need each other reciprocally. We would mutilate our charism, if we were to walk separately. And we would all be responsible for that. We do not want to, because we cannot, travel parallel paths. On a path together, respecting our differences, we put all into play: our fidelity to Francis and Clare; the gospel efficacy of our mission in the Church and world; our credibility before those who, today like yesterday, are convinced that Francis and Clare are twin, inseparable souls.

While I “beg” the Friars and Sisters, “as best I can, by my humble prayers in the mercy of Christ” (*1LtCl* 31), that they all remain faithful to the inheritance we have received, I animate each and every one of them, to have the courage to review our relationships, to strengthen them and make them more significant in a gospel and Franciscan sense in the light of the relationships between Francis and Clare and in the light of all they left to us.

Acknowledge your calling
(cf. *TestCl* 4), **revive the gift**
of God in you (cf. *2Tm* 1,6)

To know our vocation in order to respond to it better is a great challenge we constantly meet. It is a task that never ends and cannot be delegated, we put our fidelity on the line in it.

For Clare, as for Francis, our vocation, which is also our mission, is to live the Holy Gospel (*RCl* 1,2; *2R* 1,1). By living the Gospel, we glorify “our heavenly Father

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throughout His Holy Church” (*TestCl* 4) and we bless and praise Him (*TestCl* 6) at all times and in every place through our “celebrated and holy manner of life” (*TestCl* 4). In this way we will form “a polished collection of living stones” (*2Cel* 204) and we will be an “example and mirror for others” and also for each other (cf. *TestCl* 6).

Our life and mission are great and beautiful, dear Sisters and Brothers! Let us consider the multiple gifts which we received and daily receive from the “Father of mercies”, especially that of our vocation (cf. *TestCl* 2). Let us consider the copious goodness of God towards us (cf. *TestCl* 5). The Lord has granted us many things! Let us return to Him an increase of His talents which we received and let us keep the commandments of God and of our blessed father Francis (cf. *TestCl* 6). Let us give ourselves over totally to Him who gave all for us (cf. *LtO* 29). Let us give ourselves, without any reservations, to the “more beautiful than the children of men” (*2LtCl* 20). Let us rejoice always in Him and let us not allow ourselves to be shrouded in the darkness of mediocrity, of bitterness and sadness that produce “the corruptions of the world” (*5LtCl* 2). Rather should we keep ourselves faithful to Him, to whom we have promised ourselves in eternal love (cf. *5LtCl* 3-4; *1LtCl* 5).

The grace of this jubilee date of the approval of the *Rule*, which Clare so anxiously waited to see confirmed, is a “propitious occasion” which we must take advantage of in order “to confirm” our “proposal” to serve the Lord and to be faithful until death to Him, to Whom we promised ourselves (cf. *5LtCl* 14), “to progress from good to better, from virtue to virtue” (*1LtCl* 32) with unswerving feet, so that even our steps stir up no dust, but go forward securely, joyfully and swiftly along the path of prudent happiness (cf. *2LtCl* 12-13).

Clare, generated within the Church through the prophetic fruitfulness of Francis, could

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confess in her *Testament*: “The Son of God became for us the way” (*TestCI* 2). This confession of Clare, which we could well call “a prayer from the heart” of a mother to her daughters, is the synthesis of the Gospel pointed out by Francis, it is the simple and powerful conviction of the “Poor Lady”, capable of maintaining the meaning and the seeking of her whole life: to know the way to reach the vision of the beauty of the Face of God manifested in Jesus Christ! This *Path* took shape in the life of Clare, creating a space open to “the operation of the Spirit of the Lord”, giving origin to the “forma vitae” of the Poor Clares, which she herself outlined in the *Rule* confirmed by Pope Innocent IV on the 9th August 1253.

It has been said that Clare has the privilege of focusing Franciscanism on the essential. For that reason, at this time in which it is necessary to focus on the essential elements of our charism, I would like to highlight three “priorities” that seem to me to be fundamental in the life of the Poor Clare as well as in the life of every Friar Minor: the contemplative dimension, poverty and fraternity. Living these “priorities” will make our life more visible and significant and will transform our existence into “a prophecy of the future” (*NMI* 3).

**The contemplative dimension:
“Transform your whole being,
through contemplation, into the
image of the Godhead Itself”
(3LtCI 13)**

Making the Gospel the only rule of life, as in the case of Francis and Clare, implies having discovered the primacy of God and of His Word in everyday life. The said primacy is not a general principle, but the central nucleus of our common vocation. For that reason, the contemplative dimension must be considered as the first and fundamental expression of our discipleship of Christ.

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The said contemplative dimension, which, in the expression of Clare, consists essentially in the loving embrace of Christ in order to identify with Him, stems, in both Clare and Francis, from an attentive look full of wonder and gratitude at the mystery of the incarnation. He, “whom the heavens could not contain”, came down to make His home “in the little cloister” of the “sacred womb” of the Maiden of Nazareth (cf. *3LtCl* 18-19). The “Lord of lords” (*2LtCl* 1), “so worthy, so holy and glorious”, on receiving “the flesh of humanity and our frailty” (*2LtF* 4), “chose to appear despised, needy and poor in this world” (*1LtCl* 19); “and, being rich” (*2Cor* 8,9), wished to accept poverty in this world, together with the Blessed Virgin, His Mother” (*2LtF* 5).

In Clare, this gaze is the gaze of spouse to Spouse. In Francis and Clare this gaze is that of a heart in love which contemplates the incarnation of the Word of the Father in the light of love. It is the attentive and permanent gaze “daily..., constantly” (*4LtCl* 15), which leads to discovering the beauty of Jesus Christ, the “Spouse of most noble lineage” (*1LtCl* 7) with the “most beautiful” aspect (*1LtCl* 9), “whose beauty all the heavenly hosts admire unceasingly”, and “whose glorious vision will be the happiness of all the citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem” (*4LtCl* 10.13).

Faced by the marvel that the Son of God had come down for our salvation, Clare could not but exclaim in her fullness of amazement: “O marvellous humility, O astonishing poverty! The King of the angels, the Lord of heaven and earth, is laid in a manger!” (*4LtCl* 20-21). And she also cannot but invite us to the contemplation of such a mystery. “Look..., dwell on..., contemplate” (*4LtCl* 19.22.28).

But, if the poverty and humility of Bethlehem inflamed the interior amazement of Francis and Clare and conquered them for God, Calvary would be the privileged place of spousal love of the virgin Clare and of the

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transforming love of Francis. Indeed, it is in the passion and death of the Lord that the love of God for the human race, His “indescribable charity” (*4LtCl* 23), to the ultimate consequences, is revealed. Faced by the scandal of the cross, therefore, the gaze of Francis becomes a following: “leaving us an example that we should follow in His footprints (cf. *1Pt* 2,21)” (*2Ltf* 13), and that of Clare becomes penetrating, impassioned and full of compassion: “As a poor virgin, embrace the poor Christ. Look upon Him who became contemptible for you and follow Him, making yourself contemptible in the world for Him... Gaze upon Him, consider Him, contemplate Him, as you desire to imitate Him, your Spouse... become, for your salvation, the lowest of men, despised, struck, scourged untold times throughout His whole body and then died amid the sufferings of the Cross” (*2LtCl* 18-20).

In Clare, as in Francis, contemplation is not reduced to mere intellectual consideration, but is enveloping and global, and, as a consequence, involves the whole person in all his/her dimensions: spiritual, intellectual, affective and sensitive. “His love inflames our love” (*4LtCl* 11), is all-embracing. Therefore, the mind, soul and heart (cf. *3LtCl* 12-13) are constantly turned to the Lord (cf. *1R* 22,19; *4LtCl* 15) in order to lead to a progressive identification as a spouse of the Loved One, so that even “the walls of flesh” must not be an obstacle, but rather be more transparent yet of Christ: “Place your mind before the mirror of eternity... and transform your whole being into the image of the Godhead Itself through contemplation” (*3LtCl* 12.13).

As Francis, through love, transformed himself into a living image of the Loved One (cf. *LMj* 13,5), so also did Clare, enflamed by love for her Spouse, she was the loved one transformed into the Loved One. And that will happen to all those who fix their gaze and heart on God.

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Franciscan-Clarean contemplation, far from being a pious pietism, is a process of identification with the Lord. Whoever assumes a contemplative attitude in his life is transformed into a “new creature” (*Gal* 6, 15) and can truly say: “Life to me is Christ” (*Ph* 1,21). For both Clare and Francis, as well as for the Sisters and Friars, to contemplate is to allow oneself be inhabited by Christ, in order to change oneself into His permanent abode (cf. *Jn* 14,23); it is “to gaze”, “observe” and “adorn oneself” with the virtues of the Lord: blessed poverty, holy humility and indescribable charity (*4LtCl* 15.16.18); it is to gaze attentively on Christ and embrace Him, with the desire to imitate Him (cf. *2LtCl* 18-20).

It is the logic of love which leads, through its very nature, to transformation and action. In this way contemplation is discipleship and discipleship leads to contemplation once again. In other words, contemplation is life and life is contemplation. I think it can be affirmed with every reason that, for both St. Clare and St. Francis, discipleship and contemplation coincide up to the point that contemplation leads them to identifying themselves with Jesus, poor, chaste and obedient through love. In the same way, the form of gospel-contemplative life embraced by Clare and her Sisters, following the example of Francis, is the logical response to the madness of the love of God revealed in the incarnation, passion and death of Jesus.

St. Clare, as St. Francis had done beforehand, travelled this path to the end. She observed and contemplated Christ with all the love that a woman illuminated by the Spirit of the Lord was capable of and, unifying mind, heart and will, travelled with decided and light step the same steps of the Son of God, who “was poor as He lay in the crib, poor as He lived in the world, and Who remained naked on the cross” (*TestCl* 13).

Continually contemplating the face of Christ, Clare reflected Him as in a “mirror” and

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communicated the power that came to her from nourishing and guarding in her heart and life a strong passion for Christ, her Spouse, and a tender compassion for the man and woman of all times. In this way, Clare, “impassioned lover of the poor crucified Christ” (John Paul II), and Francis, “true lover and imitator” of the poor crucified Jesus Christ (cf. *TestCl 2*), are transformed into a testimony of the love of God for humanity.

As is proper for a person profoundly in love, Clare and Francis identified themselves with Jesus, they reflected Him, they clothed themselves with Him and transformed themselves into Him. Their hearts were seduced by the Spouse, enraptured by the Lord. Both allowed themselves to be enshrouded by the light that sparkles the “mirror” of the Father. This is a fundamental experience. The admiration, the lived silence and the cloister, especially of the heart, would be the immediate consequences for both the Poverello and Sister Clare.

In the light of the example of Clare and Francis we can ask ourselves: What place does God occupy in our lives? How do we live the contemplative dimension which characterises the Franciscan-Clarean charism? What are the obstacles that we find in our life of contemplation and how can we remove them? In our concrete case, do discipleship and contemplation coincide? How is the “cloister of the heart” lived in our fraternities?

Dear Sisters and Brothers, the present-day world is crying aloud to us to show them Jesus. This requires a life of contemplation, a life in which, fixing our mind and heart on the “mirror”, which is Christ, and “overcoming every impediment and putting aside every care and anxiety” we can “serve, love, honour and adore the Lord God with a clean heart and a pure mind” (*1R 22,26*). Our brothers and sisters, mankind, are asking us to love totally the One who gave Himself totally for us in such a way that, like Francis and Clare, we transform

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ourselves in such a way into the image of the Loved One, into a living image of Jesus Christ (cf. *Rm* 8,29), who makes His own life seen through our life (cf. *2Cor* 4,10).

Contemplation made Francis into “a new man” and Clare into “a fountain of light”. At the beginning of this the XXI Century, Clare and Francis invite us to “taste the hidden sweetness which God Himself has reserved for those who love Him” (*3LtCl* 14). With gaze and heart turned towards God, Clare and Francis invite us not to allow ourselves to be swept away by hurry, activism, noise or superficiality. Do we Sister and Friars have the courage to accept that invitation? We also are obliged to “bless and praise God” (*TestCl* 6), to place our mind, soul and heart in Jesus Christ in order to transform ourselves into Him (cf. *3LtCl* 12-13). There is no doubt that on this will depend the meaning and depth of our own life, the significance and future of our fraternities.

This is the great challenge we have before us. It is such that, if our fraternities are not transformed into “schools” for seeking God, into “tables” where the bread of the Word is shared daily, into “protected places” of spirituality, prayer, adoration and contemplation; if we are not men and women in which the primacy of God and the contemplative dimension take on suitable and concrete forms (cf. *NMI* 3), we will not be a point of reference for the world.

“To live without anything of their own”: Embrace the poor Christ in poverty (cf. *2LtCl* 18)

Poverty is one of the characteristic notes of Franciscanism, particularly of the form of life of the Poor Clares. Living “without anything of their own” (*2R* 1,1; *RCI* 1,2) could be well said to be the dominant and distinctive note of our “doing penance” (cf. *RCI* 6,1). “To live without

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anything of their own” is something nonnegotiable for Francis and Clare, two real “anawin” or “poor of the Lord”.

Clare and Francis, referring to those who wish to embrace this life, ask that the word of the Gospel be announced to them (cf. *Mt* 19,21): “go sell what you own and give the money to the poor” (*RCl* 2,8; *2R* 2,5). This gospel word is the basis of the life of Francis and Clare: it is the charismatic word par excellence, the frame of reference of their gospel experience, the basic option which inspires the decision to live according to “the perfection of the Holy Gospel” (*FLCl* 1; cf. *RCl* 6,3), orients the path and illuminates the subsequent steps.

The “predilection” that Francis and Clare showed for radical poverty, expressed in the “living without anything of their own”, was not inspired by the fashion of the time, but by the love of Christ, the Poor One par excellence (cf. *TestCl* 13). They learned spoliation, the most radical and absolute self-abasement, from Him.

The contemplation of the poor and crucified Christ is at the centre of the spiritual experience of Francis and Clare, it gave meaning to and explained their concrete options in life, especially those that refer to poverty. The path followed by Francis and Clare is the path pointed out by Jesus Christ through his attitudes and sentiments: “His state was divine, yet he did not cling to His equality with God, but emptied Himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are, He was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross” (*Ph* 2,6-8).

Faith permitted Clare and Francis to discover that, for the salvation of sinners and the redemption of slaves, the Lord did not choose the way of wealth and power, but that of poverty, humility and service; and from their faith “the Poverello of Assisi” and the “poor Lady” intuited that salvation and redemption can only be received in the measure in which,

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through poverty, humility and service, they entered into the path of Christ and followed His footprints (cf. *1Pe* 2,21). For both Clare and Francis, “most holy poverty” is not simply a virtue, or simply a renunciation of things; it is, above all, a name and a face: the face of the poor and crucified Jesus Christ (cf. *2LtCl* 19).

He who is the Word of God was born naked among us and He who is the light and life of all that exists was wrapped in swaddling clothes and tenderness through the love of His Mother. Stripped of His clothing, the Son of God died for us; stripped of all beauty, He who is the grace of the universe handed Himself over for us (cf. *TestCl* 13). That was the path which the blessed Francis and blessed Clare, though the grace of God, wished to walk.

Contemplating the mysteries of the incarnation, passion, death and resurrection, Brother Francis and Sister Clare etched into the most intimate depths of their hearts the memory of the humiliation of the Lord and they understood that He was addressing to them in particular the words of the Gospel: “*If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me*” (*Mt* 16,24). On the basis of this experience, “they clothed themselves in the spirit of poverty, in the sentiment of humility and affection of tender compassion” (*LMj* 1,6), which led them to the imitation of Christ, the blessed and glorious Son of God, by following in his footprints along the path of humility and poverty (cf. *1R* 9,1; *3LtCl* 4.25) and embracing Him in the poorest, in the lepers (cf. *LMj* 1,5-6).

For Francis and Clare, contemplation of the poor Christ was not reduced to a nice mystical theory of detachment, rather did it take flesh in a real, concrete and essential poverty. He being the model of all perfection, it only remained to reproduce His image: “Look upon Him who became contemptible for you and follow Him, making yourself contemptible in the world for Him” (*2LtCl* 19; cf. *Adm* 6).

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Radical poverty, the “living without anything of their own”, is, in Francis and Clare, the response to the *kénosis* of Jesus, an attempt to re-live His self-abasement, His mystery of spoliation and the total abandonment of His own life and dignity into the hands of the Father.

Like the Lord Jesus Christ, both Brother Francis and Sister Clare set out naked on the path to conversion, “he trampled on the allure of mortal life” (*2Cel* 214), free from all care for self and from every impediment, and disposed to make spiritual combat (cf. *1LtCl* 29). And, as faithful imitators of Christ, when the hour of their passing from temporal light to perpetual light came, they fell asleep in the Lord as they had lived: “without anything of their own”. Brother Francis, having been transformed during his life into a real imitator of the poor and crucified Christ, wished to be placed naked on the bare earth a short time before dying and thus, stripped of his tunic of sack-cloth, he turned, according to tradition, his face towards heaven and said to his brothers: “I have done what is mine; may Christ teach you what is yours” (cf. *2Cel* 214). On her part, Clare, whose vocation and life are condensed into “observe forever the poverty and humility of our Lord Jesus Christ” (*RCl* 12,10), could say at the end of her days: “as I have always been most zealous and solicitous to observe and to have the other Sisters observe the holy poverty... so too, the others who will succeed me in office should be bound always to observe it and have it observed by the other Sisters” (*TestCl* 12; cf. *Test* 34-35).

The “privilege of poverty”, the “living without anything of their own”, “without possessions, or properties in common” (cf. *RCl* 6,5) which would give material security and deprive us of having the concrete experience of God as the “great almsgiver” and “Father of mercies” (cf. *2LtCl* 3; *TestCl* 2), is the translation in a Clarean key of the intuition of Francis. That is an option, if you like, which is even more radical since the cloister, dear Sisters,

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makes you even more vulnerable before life than itinerancy and mendicancy makes the Friars, and it places you before the determination to have experiences of your total dependence on God and on the Friars.

Following the example of Francis and Clare, “living without anything of our own” which includes all the dimensions of everyday living, is, for us Franciscans and Poor Clares, the proof of our faith, which consists of experiencing the extent to which we are loved and guarded by a splendid and merciful Father (cf. *TestCl* 17), as the small child is by his mother (cf. *Proc* XI,3). It is a way of loving Him who loved us first; a form of radical trust in God, in His fidelity, in His love; a form of total spoliation that leads us to having nothing in order to be filled to the brim with the richness of the love of God and to pray with Blessed Francis: “You, Lord, are all our riches to sufficiency” (*PrG* 4).

In this way, the dimension of material poverty – an important dimension, which must never be left to one side – is inspired and, at the same time, leads to the more internal and more radical dimension of expropriation in all its forms, that which reaches the very heart of the person: The Brothers and Sisters must not appropriate anything for themselves (cf. *2R* 6,1; *RCl* 8,1; *Adm* 2,3; 7,4; 8,3). Said in another way, for Clare and Francis there is no poverty without humility, there is no poverty without minority, there is no poverty without assuming the humiliation that can come to us from others (cf. *Proc* II,1; *Adm* 14,4).

In the light of all that was said, it is necessary to ask ourselves: How do we express the “living without anything of our own” in a practical way? What forms of poverty and minority are we called on to ‘invent’ or ‘recoup’ so that our commitment to “living without anything of our own” is really a visible and credible, significant and signifying, testimony? What is the real basis of our poverty? Are we

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convinced that 'itinerancy', understood above all as a spoliation and a freedom of spirit, is a characteristic of the Franciscan and Clarean vocation and a requirement of our "living without anything of our own"? What is our attitude and disposition in the face of the changes that we necessarily have to carry out?

Christ carried out His work poor. Francis and Clare concluded their task poor. It is now our turn to assume, as an existential attitude, living always in an attitude of conversion (cf. *2R* 2,17), denouncing, in this way, the false values of our times. Poverty consists of: "living without anything of our own", as we promised; being free and unattached to places, people or things, "as pilgrims and strangers in this world" (*2R* 6,2; *RCI* 8,2); putting the structures at the service of life and not life at their service; working "faithfully and devotedly" as a first manifestation of our condition of being poor, "avoiding idleness, the enemy of the soul" (*2R* 5,1-2; *RCI* 7,1-2); restoring to the Lord, through word and example, all the gifts we received from Him (cf. *1R* 17,17; *Adm* 18,2).

And, given that all goods belong only to God (cf. *Adm* 7,4; *2LtCl* 3), we should feel ourselves moved to share them fraternally with those who have less than we have; let us wish to be "meek, peaceful, modest, gentle and humble" (*2R* 3,11), announcers of peace and justice, without judging anyone or being annoyed or disturbed by anything, not even by the sin of a brother (cf. *Adm* 11; *RCI* 9,5); and let us try to adopt the life and condition of the little people of society, behaving among them as minors, not setting ourselves apart, through our tenor of life, from those who have fewer resources and "accepting with good grace being held as vile, simple and despicable" (cf. *Adm* 19).

Let us never forget, Brothers and Sisters, that this is the will of Francis and is what we promised: "to follow the teaching and foot-

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prints of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1R 1,1: cf. 3LtCl 4), to love “our Lady, holy poverty” always and to observe it faithfully until the end (cf. *TestCl* 4; *RCl* 12,13; *TestCl* 11-12).

**Communion of life in fraternity:
The Lord gave me Brothers
and Sisters** (cf. *Test* 14; *TestCl* 7)

Clare, faithfully following the gospel option of Francis, lived the discipleship of the poor Christ in communion of life in fraternity. Since the Most High revealed to Francis that he had to “live according to the form of the Holy Gospel” (*Test* 14) and enlightened the heart of Clare (cf. *TestCl* 7), neither one or the other understood themselves other than as being in profound communion with their Brothers and Sisters. And, as the Lord granted them Brothers and Sisters (cf. *Test* 14; *TestCl* 7), neither did they think of any other form of life which was not fraternal life in community.

Fraternity, for both Clare and Francis, is the place in which the Gospel is lived in everyday life, the privileged environment in which testimony is given to a God who is communion in diversity and diversity in communion. The fraternity, therefore, should be an irrevocable element of the Franciscan-Clarean gospel project.

Called to follow the Gospel and the footprints of Our Lord Jesus Christ more closely, the Friars Minor and Poor Clares are established in fraternity and as fraternity. If the consecrated life is “*signum fraternitatis*” (cf. *VC* c. II), life in fraternity is our profile, our vocation and mission, our way of living the Gospel and of giving witness to Christ (cf. *Jn* 13,35).

Fraternity is, undoubtedly, one of the axes, together with contemplation and poverty / minority, around which Francis and Clare made their way of life revolve. In this sense, the names we have, Friars Minor and Poor Clares, are very significant and they sum-

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marise our vocation and mission in the way Francis and Clare consigned them to us.

Fraternity, as a requirement of our Franciscan and Poor Clare vocation, begins from an experience of faith, thanks to which Francis, first of all, and Clare, later on, could recognise that others are real gifts from the Lord: Francis, full of amazement, could recognise that “the Lord gave me brothers”, and Clare could confess likewise: “... together with the few Sisters whom the Lord had given me soon after my conversion” (*TestCl* 7). God gave Sisters to Clare as He had given Brothers to Francis. Both groups are a gift from the “Father of mercies”.

What is born of an experience of faith is fed and nourished by the contemplation of the Trinitarian mystery, the model and the origin of all fraternal communion (cf. *FLC* 8.9), and is manifested in gestures full of affection which exude genuine charity and exhibit a transparent relationship, without duplicity, based on simplicity, familiarity and recognition of the gifts of the Lord in each one of the Brothers and Sisters. Only the gaze of one who loves and has a simple heart, as in the case of Francis and Clare, is capable of discovering, with admiration and respect, the work of the Spirit in others (cf. *MP* 85).

There is nothing strange in the fact that San Damiano and the Porziuncola were quickly changed into places where the ideal of the primitive Christian community (cf. *Acts* 2,44-47; 3, 34-35) took on life in everyday events and that the experience became visible in very concrete gestures, through which we nourish others (cf. *2R* 6,7-8; *RCI* 8,15-16) and all, unconditionally, obey God and each other in charity.

However, if fraternity is a gift which is accepted through faith and gratitude, it is also a task and, as such, must be constructed and guarded. On the one hand, we build it on the basis of some deep human relationships,

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through the cultivation of the qualities required in all human relationships (cf. *FLC* 27). On the other hand, fraternity being what it is - an "earthenware jar that holds this treasure" (*2Cor* 4,7) -, it is necessary to guard it carefully. It is no wonder, in this context, that Clare, making the exhortations of Francis to the Friars her own (cf. *2R* 10,7; *Adm* 24 and 25), exhorts her Sisters to "be on their guard against all pride, vainglory, envy, greed, worldly care and anxiety, detraction and murmuring, dissension and division" (*RCI* 10,4). Both of them were aware of the dangers that face this treasure and, therefore, of the need for active cooperation between the gift from God and personal commitment (cf. *FLC* 23).

Fraternity, to be a proposal of gospel life, must be true, concrete and intimate. For that reason Clare, at the same times that she asked each Sister to "make known her needs to the other with confidence" (*RCI* 8,15; cf. *2R* 6,8), exhorted them to manifest, through works, the love that they profess: "Loving one another with the charity of Christ, let the love you have in your hearts be shown outwardly in your deeds so that, compelled by such an example, the Sisters may always grow in love of God and in charity for one another" (*TestCl* 18). And, if any friction or scandal should arise among them, the Sisters must not allow themselves to be led by anger or be disturbed, but to maintain peace of heart and to offer mutual pardon to heal the wounds (cf. *RCI* 9,3ff; *Adm* 11), always aware that "unity of mutual love is the bond of perfection" (*RCI* 10,4) and that fraternity is built at the price of reconciliation and pardon (cf. *FLC* 26).

If fraternity defines and gives authenticity to our consecration and mission, then our communities must be real fraternities and be made visible as such. To do this, we must construct and reconstruct them day by day by everybody obeying the word of the Gospel that echoes in the heart and inspires tender affection and authenticity in everyday gestures through which love for others is shaped. Any

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fraternal gesture whatever, even to the most elementary, the most humble and simple one, if it is full of goodness, discretion and susceptibility, can be changed into a “polished stone” (2*Cel* 204) in the construction of fraternity.

The whole life of the Poor Clares and Friars Minor must lead to unity, to mutual love, to fraternal communion. In this way, contemplation of the love of God, manifested in the mysteries of the incarnation, passion and death of Jesus, finds a privileged ground in fraternal life. In it the God Love gives Himself to be tasted, touched. In the same way, the expropriation of the highest poverty not only unites us to the poor Christ, but unites the Friars and Sisters among themselves, opening up a space in their hearts to the holy operation of the Spirit, which is charity. In this way, the other is a gift which is offered to our freedom to love.

In building up Franciscan fraternity, the service of authority is a key piece. Authority for both Clare and Francis, is, above all, discipleship of Christ the servant, the Son of man who came to serve and not to be served (cf. *Mt* 20,28; *Adm* 4). This service is expressed in being builders of communion (cf. *RCl* 4,10-11; *LtM* 1-12), in the admonition and correction of the Friars and Sisters (*RCL* 10,1; 9,1; *RB* 10,1), in the faithful protection of the charism received from the Lord (cf. *RCl* 6,4) and of the Friars and Sisters entrusted to them (*RCl* 4,6; *RnB* 4,6), and in promoting corresponsibility and cooperation (cf. *RCl* 2,1; 4,12.16).

Given that fraternity implies openness to and recognition of others, to construct fraternity means working so that collaboration with other fraternities should be a beautiful reality. This requires the renunciation of self-sufficiency, whatever the resources available to a fraternity may be. This would also mean having a great sense of realism. How can a Friar believe himself so “rich” that he begins to think that he does not need others? Arrogance and pride, which can come from the number of Friars and Sisters

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or, inclusively, from a good intellectual preparation, are fruits of the flesh, never of the Spirit. Communion which opens the door to cooperation is the greatest antidote to tiredness and lack of hope which, at times, haunt our hearts.

Temptation can mean “provincialism” for the Friars Minor, or the “autonomy” enjoyed by the monasteries for the Poor Clares, if these are thought of and practised as a closing in on self, as a “defence” in the face of external “dangers” which threaten certain false securities.

In the light of what was said above, we need to ask ourselves: “What image do our fraternities offer of themselves? What does belonging to an Order mean to us? What sense of belonging to it do we have? What means do we use to construct fraternity and to overcome the conflicts which arise in our fraternities? How do we live the qualities required in all human relationships? What examples of pardon and reconciliation can we offer to the present-day world, which is so violent and divided? What changes are we being asked to bring about in order to achieve real cooperation between Provinces and monasteries?”

I personally am convinced that if we have come a long way in this “area” of fraternity, which is not easy, there is still a long way to go to achieve fraternities that could offer our society the singular testimony of being “privileged places of meeting with God” (*GGCC* 40) and “homes” in which “full human, Christian and religious maturity” (*GGCC* 39) can be achieved.

One of the great challenges that we have before us is that of passing from a life in common to one of communion of life in fraternity. For that, it is not enough, by a long stretch, to live under the same roof. Nor is it the carrying out of the same work, or even of being good friends. We are not a commune, or a business, or a simple group of friends. We are brothers and sisters, we form a “family united in Christ” (*ES* II 25), in which there should be real and

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harmonious, cordial and fraternal, interpersonal relationships animated by faith in the Father, in whom we are all children, in the Spirit, who unites us in respect for diversity, and in the Son, in whom we are brothers and sisters. This is a faith which leads us to love all without distinction, including those who suffer and, perhaps because of that, cause suffering. It is a faith which animates us to hope in others and in the possibility of their conversion and growth. It is a faith which moves us to work untiringly in the construction of the fraternity, even though this means dying to self (cf. *LG* 46).

Francis is considered a “universal brother” and Clare has been defined as “a fire of charity, honey of goodness, a bond of peace and communion of fraternity” (*BC*). They carried out their task. The time has come for us to carry out ours. In other words, it is time to apply ourselves to carrying out our mission, which consists of being a living parable about being a fraternal and reconciled humanity and in promoting a “spirituality of communion” (*NMI* 42), especially within our own fraternities (cf. *VC* 51), in order to extend it to our Provinces and Federations, to our respective Orders, to the Franciscan Family, to the whole of humanity. “Sharing the bread of fraternity” we will be a sign, especially through the witness of life, of the new humanity reunited around the Risen Jesus through the power of the Spirit.

Forming ourselves to form and live in creative fidelity (cf. *VC* 37)

All that we have shared up to now presupposes a great flexibility and availability to permit ourselves to be formed and to transform the mind and heart through a serious and solid formative journey, which “begins with the call of God and the individual’s decision to walk with Saint Francis [and St. Clare] in the footprints of the poor and crucified Christ” (*RFF* 1), a journey that never ends (*VC* 65).

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In both the Friars Minor and Poor Clares, formation must be a dynamic process of harmonic growth of the whole person (cf. *VC 65*), which, under the action of the Holy Spirit, opens his/her heart to the Gospel and commits himself/herself to maintain constantly an attitude of conversion. In this way, we will take practical steps towards a “gradual identification with the attitude of Christ towards the Father” (*VC 65*).

Among the many characteristics of ongoing and initial formation of the Friar Minor and Poor Clare which we could point out, I would like to underline the following:

- It must be experiential. For that, formation must sink its roots deeper into the life of fraternity, generate life and tend to transform what is learned into works (cf. *Adm 21*)
- It must have a positive and, at the same time, purposeful outlook on the present moment. Formation must assume the challenges that the world and history present to it by reading and interpreting, in the light of the Gospel, the signs of the times (cf. *LgP 6*), and by harmonising memory with prophecy in order to travel along a fruitful and creative path, inserted into the present and prophetically open to the future.
- It must be a formation of quality. The quality of our future depends, without any doubt, on the quality that our formation has. If we wish to guarantee a certain stability, in both the more difficult times and in the most ordinary and daily events (cf. *VC 65.71*), we have to bet on a formation of quality capable of planting in the hearts of the Friars and Sisters “those human, spiritual and charismatic values” which are necessary (*SAFC 18*). This, “in an era as rushed as ours” requires time, especially time, “perseverance and patient waiting..., because, in reality, a person is fashioned very slowly” (*SAFC 18*). In our case, a formation of quality also requires giving privilege to the experience of faith, communion of life in fraternity and affectivity.

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- It must be a personalised formation. Given that the subject in formation is the first and principal person responsible for his/her own formation and, given that each person is an unrepeatable initiative of God, formation must be personalised with the purpose of having each one responsibly assuming the dynamic of his/her vocational growth. A personalised formative process, therefore, is imposed and it should help to personalise, attentive to the particularity of each person, by accepting and stimulating his/her rhythm of growth, accompanying and helping each Friar and Sister to discover and make evermore fruitful the gift of God in his/her life.

To form constitutes today a challenge which we must assume in the joy and hope of one who knows he/she has been called to continue the mission of Jesus, the only Master. To form ourselves, to live in a state of ongoing formation or conversion, is the great challenge that comes to us from creative fidelity to our vocation and mission.

Conclusion

Dear Brothers and Sisters, with simplicity I have made you participants in some reflections on the elements which, from a careful reading of the writings of Clare and Francis, I think are essential to the Franciscan-Clarean charism. I have not tried to be exhaustive in this presentation, not even in the enumeration of the said elements. I have simply tried to allow Clare and Francis to speak through their writings – the reason for the abundance of quotations – and to make it manifest that it really is a matter of “two twin souls”.

At the conclusion of this letter, making the words of Clare to Sister Agnes of Prague my own, “I beg you, [my dear Brothers and Sisters], to receive my words”, which I have written so imperfectly to you, “with kindness

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and devotion, seeing in them at least the [fraternal] affection which in the fire of charity I feel daily towards you”, dearly beloved Brothers and Sisters in the Lord (*4LtCl* 37).

With Clare, I invite you to pray: “For this reason I bend my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (*Eph* 3,14), that through the prayers and merits of the glorious and holy Virgin Mary, His Mother, of our most blessed Father Francis, [of our most beloved Sister and Mother Clare] and of all the Saints, the Lord Himself who has given us a good beginning will [also] give the increase and constant perseverance to the end. Amen” (*TestCl* 23).

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A Prayer to St. Clare

Clare, overflowing heart,
make happiness stand out.

Clare, deeply in love,
arrange tenderness in its place.

Clare, brightness in name and life,
guide us through the night.

Clare, strong wind of the Spirit,
dissipate our fears.

Clare, lamp set on the table,
gather us in family.

Clare, of pure clear eyes,
cleanse the dust from our eyelids.

Clare, mother and sister,
pray for us.

Pray for these hands that err at times.
Pray for these eyes that close at times.
Pray for this heart
that loves not as it should.

Clare, mother and sister,
pray for the peace we lack,
for the hope we have not,
for the joy that has been quenched.

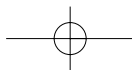
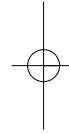
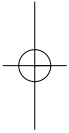
Clare, mother and sister,
pray to the Lord that
He might grant us the gift of fidelity
and the gift of new Brothers and Sisters.

Rome, OFM General Curia
11th August 2004

Br. José Rodríguez Carballo OFM
Minister general

Prot. 094688

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

Sacred Scripture

| | |
|-------|----------------------------------|
| 1 Pt | First Letter of St. Peter |
| 2 Cor | Second Letter to the Corinthians |
| 2Tim | Second Letter to Timothy |
| Acts | Acts of the Apostles |
| Eph | Letter to the Ephesians |
| Gal | Letter to the Galatians |
| Gn | Genesis |
| Hab | Habakkuk |
| Jm | Letter of St. James |
| Jn | Gospel of St. John |
| Mt | Gospel of Matthew |
| Ph | Letter to the Philippians |
| Rm | Letter to the Romans |

The writings of St. Clare

| | |
|--------|---|
| 1LtCl | First Letter of St. Clare to Agnes of Prague |
| 2LtCl | Second Letter of St. Clare to Agnes of Prague |
| 3LtCl | Third Letter of St. Clare to Agnes of Prague |
| 4LtCl | Fourth Letter of St. Clare to Agnes of Prague |
| 5LtCl | Letter to Ermentrude of Bruges |
| RCl | Rule of St. Clare |
| TestCl | Testament of St. Clare |

The writings of St. Francis

| | |
|-------|--|
| 1R | First Rule of St. Francis (RnB) |
| 2LtF | Second Letter to the Faithful |
| 2R | Second Rule of St. Francis (RB) |
| Adm | Admonitions |
| FLCl | Form of Life for Clare and her Sisters |
| LtM | Letter to a Minister |
| LtO | Letter to the Order |
| PrG | The Praises of God the Most High |
| Test | Testament of St. Francis |
| TestS | Testament of Siena |

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Other Acronyms

| | |
|------|--|
| 2Cel | Celano: Second Life of St. Francis |
| BC | Bull of Canonisation |
| ES | Ecclesia Sanctae |
| FLC | Fraternal Life in Community |
| GGCC | General Constitutions OFM |
| LG | Lumen Gentium |
| LgP | May the Lord give you Peace! Final Document of Chapter 2003 |
| LMj | The Major Legend |
| MP | Mirror of Perfection |
| NMI | Novo Millennio Ineunte |
| Proc | Process of Canonisation of St. Clare |
| RFF | Ratio Formationis Franciscanae OFM |
| SAFC | Starting Afresh from Christ |
| VC | Vita Consecrata |