

Briege O'Hare – Session Three / Clare Retreat, August 2005, Stella Niagara

We are taking the story of Clare but we are reading into it about ourselves. We are looking at her journey as a kind of mythological journey even though it is historically true but we are reading it as something true about us, so we can discover deep inner truths about ourselves through this archetypal figure of Clare of Assisi. We have seen so far the prophetic dimension, the role of Clare that was prophesied as Light. We have reflected on ourselves as light and we looked at the marvelous episode where she left her family home in the night, escaped in search of her Beloved. We saw the parallels with the Song of Songs, Chapter 5. Sometimes when I read John of the Cross and the wonderful poem on the dark night, I keep thinking that he must have read this episode about Clare. Because, as you know, he comes later. You know that wonderful poem, "Upon a darkened night the flame of love was burning in my breast. And by a lantern bright I fled my house for all was in quiet rest. Guided by the night beneath the secret stair, I swiftly fled to where he waited still. While all within lay quiet as the dead. Oh night, thou wast my guide. Oh night, more lovely than the rising sun. Oh night, that joins the lover to the beloved one, transforming each of them into the other." That's what Clare was about. John of the Cross only found out about that later. She escaped into the night in search of her Beloved.

Clare spent a couple of weeks with the Benedictine Sisters in Bastia, a little town about 6 kilometers beyond St. Mary of the Angels. She stayed there a couple of week only because that was the only place in Assisi that has the right of sanctuary. That was to make sure her family could not reclaim her even though they tried. Then Francis took her to a place called Panzo which is in the east of Assisi where there was a group of women, the Beguines. She spent a little time with them, maybe 3 or 4 weeks. Again, Francis was allowing that to happen partly because, I suspect, Clare was an aristocrat. She would not have had any experience about how to take care of herself. She was very good possibly at the refined things of life, such as embroidery. These Beguine women likely showed her what to do with the wool when you get it off the back of the sheep, and how to make it into whatever it's supposed to be. It was good training for Clare because they dealt in textiles and could teach her. The sisters probably continued to do that later on. She was only with them three or four weeks at most. Then Francis, I suppose, felt that she was ready, I don't know if it was entirely his decision. She was on her own, but then her sister Caterina joined her, who later we know as Agnes of Assisi and then a couple of other women, probably cousins of Clare or friends, maybe from Perugia from her time of exile there with her family joined her. Then Francis moved her to San Damiano. This is a very important moment. We are going to look at this and see what it is for us.

Clare arrived down to San Damiano with three or four companions. Recent research indicates that this was in fact not a friary but there were possibly two or three or four friars living there. And so, Clare was joining the brothers. We have to remember this! She was one of the guys, they were the same lot. Clare, being an aristocrat, she was also smart. She needed it on paper that she really did belong here. She understood the need, probably from her family who were used to dealing with legal documents and things. She wanted it clear that she was part of the brotherhood. She also needed Francis to somehow put it on paper or parchment (it would have been then) just what the life was that she was committing herself to. So, she asked Francis to write for them a little form of life. You think about that. Just imagine yourselves, say three or four of you asked to do a new experiment, set up a new style of Sisters of St. Francis that really meets the gospel challenge of today that is a real sign of this beautiful gift of the Spirit in us. You're asked to go to some remote place and get it started and then to write your form of life. What would you write? It's an interesting question to ask yourself. What would you write?

I suppose if I was doing it I wouldn't do it now the way I'm telling you, because I have a bit of hindsight here, but suppose I didn't have the hindsight knowing how Francis did it. I would probably write, we rise at 6:30, we take breakfast, we meet for prayer. I'd probably write a horarium. That's not what Francis wrote. He wasn't interested in horariums or anything like that. Listen to what he wrote. I'm going to read for you the form of life he gave to Clare. It is the most incredible work of genius. Now we have only one sentence. Some scholars think there must have been more to it, but this is all that we have. Now that may or may not be so, all I know is that this one sentence contains it all. And it takes a genius to do that. You look at what we produce out of our Chapters and it wouldn't add up to what is in this sentence. Listen to what he said, "Because by divine inspiration you have made yourselves daughters and servants of the most High King, the heavenly Father, and you have taken the Holy Spirit as your Spouse choosing to live according to the perfection of the holy gospel, (because of those three things) I resolve and promise for myself and for my brothers to have that same loving care for you and special solicitude as I have for them." That's it! In other words Francis is saying you are now one of us. I have the same loving care and solicitude for you as I have for my other brothers. He has made it very clear that she has now joined the brothers, she and her sisters. And he has described the form of life as the Trinitarian life. Now that's the kind of theological word that we get so used to that we don't hear it anymore. For Francis and for Clare the bottom line is relationships. Relationship is all there is. There is nothing else on this entire earth except relationship! Everything is relationship because God is relationship, Father, Son, and Spirit.

I don't know if you are interested in things like physics. I am, though I know nothing about it. But I just get fascinated with the little bits and pieces of it that I hear from time to time. It's the kind of thing, if there is a program on TV that's got to do with those kinds of things I'm always interested. I was listening one morning not so long ago while I was doing some cleaning in my room and had the radio on, just because there was a program reflecting on some of the more recent research happenings in physics. They were talking about where we are at with this whole quest to try and understand the nature of reality, the nature of matter, what it is and all these new ideas about dark matter. One thing that fascinated me was this search since in the time of Newton, what the whole of creation is made of, what is the smallest piece of matter. They thought it was the atom, and that was it and then they discovered the split atom and that caused trouble and then we got to smaller things like quarks and protons and all these things. But they were saying on this radio program that they've now discovered the smallest piece, they think! The smallest little entity of matter, I don't know what name they've given it but it's the smallest particle. What they have discovered that it consists of three elements, there is three of them, three little entities in this particle. They discovered that if they took one away the other two just disappear. They don't exist. Now right now they are trying to figure out what that's about. But they can only exist as three. Who do you think thought that one up? Everything that exists is relationship. It can only exist as three. And we can only exist as three, as relationship within the context of Father, Son, and Spirit or Creator God, Eternal Word, and Spirit, however you want to understand the Trinitarian life. What Francis was telling Clare, her form of life, what he was saying is you have made yourselves daughters; he didn't say you are. What he means by this is we can choose to live a life in relationship or we can choose not to. We can choose to fall into the separate ego which lives for itself. And to fall into the separate ego and live for ourselves is death. It is absolute spiritual, psychological death for all of us.

We are going to try to understand the first one that she has chosen, or they have chosen, he is writing in the plural, "You have made yourselves daughters." To be a daughter of God. What does it mean to be a daughter of God? This is the first reality of the Franciscan life, to be a daughter of God, to be a son of God.

To understand we need to look at a couple of scripture texts to see where this comes from. I'm quoting first from Jeremiah 31:31. The famous text about the new covenant. Listen to some of the words, "See the days are coming, it is Yahweh who speaks, when I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel, with the House of Judah. Not a covenant like the one I made with their ancestors. On that day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt." They broke that covenant of mine so I had to show them who was master. Here God is saying, you know, they broke that agreement so I had to train them by law, by giving them laws and rules, because they didn't live the relationship of the covenant. "It is Yahweh who speaks, but now this is the covenant I will make with the House of Israel. When those days arrive, when those days arrive, it is Yahweh who speaks, deep within them I will plant my law writing it upon their hearts then I will be their God and they shall be my people. There will be no further need for neighbor to try to teach neighbor, or brother or sister to teach brother or sister or to say to brother or sister 'learn to know Yahweh, no because they will know me, the least no less than the greatest. It is Yahweh who speaks since I will forgive their iniquity and I shall never call their sin to mind.'" This is a most amazing promise. I can remember years ago when I was a young sister, reading this text and reflecting on it and saying, if this is what he means then why is everyone telling me what I'm supposed to do. Nobody needs to tell anybody who God is because everybody is going to know within them! Is it true? Yes it is true. It is fulfilled, "When those days arrive" on the day Jesus walked into the River Jordan, that's when they arrived. Listen to Mark's version of that, it is very brief. "It was at this time that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee to be baptized in the Jordan by John. No sooner had he come up out of the water when he saw the heavens torn apart and Spirit like a dove descending on him. A voice came from heaven, 'you are my Son, the Beloved, my favor rests on You.'" This is the fulfillment of the promise of Jeremiah 31. The heavens were torn apart. From the time of whatever the fall is (I don't know where your theology is of that but there was something) and the Spirit left the earth, the Spirit of God left the earth. Now the Spirit of God was still on the earth, in a sense, but peoples' experience of the Spirit was confined to only certain people, like Moses and the prophets. Elijah had the Spirit upon him. They used to talk of the Spirit coming on one and Elijah passed the Spirit on and so on, this handing down blessing of the Spirit. But when Jesus went into the Jordan the heavens were torn apart and Jesus took the whole of humanity and of creation into the River Jordan with him. He embodied in himself all creation and all of us. So that when He emerged out of the river, the heavens were torn apart, the covenant promise was fulfilled, the Spirit came upon us all and God said you are my beloved daughter, my beloved son. There is no longer now any need for anyone to tell you who God is because you know in your heart, you know yourself as God's beloved son or daughter.

Now when Francis said to Clare, "you have made yourselves daughters" of the heavenly Father, he is saying, you have chosen to live this relationship rather than the inherited religious culture in which you were formed. I know this because Francis had to do that in a very dramatic way on the day he renounced his earthly father. He stripped himself naked and gave his clothes to his father and said, "from now on I have only one Father." Francis understood this complete new reality. This new creation that Paul speaks about in 2 Corinthians, "the old creation is gone." The new one is now here but we've got to choose to live in it. You have to choose to live in this new creation. We are in a state of what Pope John Paul refers to as "eschatological tension". Both creations are co-existing at the moment, the old and the new. We have to choose which one we belong to. Unfortunately we, kind of, have a foot in each one, just in case! Which is a pity. Just move right in there. The new creation is the place of no law. It is a place where law is ended. There are no more rules, there are no more 'musts' and 'shoulds.'

There are no more feelings of serving a God who expects me to behave in certain ways. That was the old creation. To be a daughter of God is to live in a relationship of mutual love, mutual indwelling. For we simply live out of that. We know ourselves infinitely loved and we live that loving mutual relationship.

Luke, chapter 14, Jesus defines this way of being in the new creation and he puts it like this. He says, "If anyone comes to me (that is comes into this new creation) and does not hate his own father and mother, husbands, wife, and children, and brothers, and sisters, her own life – she cannot be my disciple; she cannot be in the new creation. In other words we have to move away from all the social, religious conditioning that we have from our family. We no longer take identity from our nation, our family, our social connections, our church in the sense of a social entity. None of these things is our identity anymore. The only identity we now have is daughter of God. We have no other. This is easier said than done because we are so trapped. Why is it so hard to shift into this? Why are we still caught in the old way? Why are we so conditioned?"

We have the two selves in us. We have the phenomenal self, that's the ego. And the ego has its origin in time and space, it's born of flesh and blood. There is the eternal self, this is the true self and its origin is from above. It's from the Spirit. And it's born of a virgin. This is what Francis was trying to get Clare and the sisters to live and understand; he may not have put it in the language I am using but he had the mystical insight into what I am talking about.

Jesus, when he was speaking to Nicodemus, again he speak about this in John's gospel, he tries to explain it, and he says something like this, Chapter 3, "I tell you most solemnly unless one is born through water and the Spirit she cannot enter the kingdom of God. What is born of the Spirit is Spirit. Do not be surprised when I say that you must be born from above. The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. That is how it is with all who are born of the Spirit." Jesus is the one born who was born of the Spirit and we partake of his flesh, so we, too, share in that. He was born of a virgin. Let us try and understand what this means. Jesus had to be born of a virgin. He had to be born of someone who was not created flesh to flesh. He was born of his eternal Father, in heaven in the womb of a virgin. The role of Mary in our salvation is enormously significant for us. We're only beginning to get a hold of this. The role of virgin is really important for us. This is why we are all living this vow of chastity, by the way, because we are a sign of this to the world.

You see historically, when God spoke to Moses and he was giving Moses his mission to set the people free and Moses said to God, I have to be able to tell them who you are; because there are a lot of gods around and I need to know which one you are so that I can tell the people. God said, "I am who I am." And Moses said, "What?" Am I suppose to go back and tell the people 'I am who I am' has said? They are not going to know, they're going to wonder what kind of god is that? "I am who I am." You have to have a name; I want a name. I want to be able to identify you. And God who is infinitely patient with us said, "Ok, I'll give you a name." But God was going to have to be confined now in our consciousness. So God said, "I'm the God of Abraham, I'm the God of Isaac, I'm the God of Jacob." Great said Moses, now I can handle that one. I know who you are now and I'm be able to tell them.

Now what was going on here was that Moses needed God to be confined to an historical reality. We do need an historical aspect of truth in order to grow. We need the scriptures, we need the teaching of the Church, and so on. They help us to grow. But if we stop with that we're dead! We're dead. Now Mary comes along, this amazing, wonderful...she was so incredible. She represented the Jewish tradition but she outgrew the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. She in her own body gave birth

to the eternal God, to the “I Am Who Am” God, because of herself as virgin. “A virgin shall conceive” and Emmanuel, God with us, is what she conceived. This inner presence of the Divine.

We are all called to be virgins. As daughters of God, as sons of God we are virgins; it doesn't matter if we are married or not. It doesn't matter. In the spiritual realm we are virgins. The virgin is the one who allows life to emerge from the unknown. She knows the God of scriptures and yet she remains in a state of unknowing. When the God of the past is absolutized the door to the living God is closed and direct contact with God is lost. This is what unfortunately has happened to us in the Church. The Church is a mother and a mother has two functions, one is to conceive and the other is to give birth. The Church is great at conceiving, she's conceiving all over the place. But she's very reluctant to give birth. So we are all trapped in the womb of the mother. Because to give birth means to set free. To give birth means you now take off and live from the life of the Spirit within you. You no longer live by the rules of the womb, so to speak, which was necessary and is necessary and will always be necessary for the formation. This is what Paul's letter to the Romans is all about. The law itself doesn't give life, but we need to be formed in the law. Then we have to outgrow it. Jesus had to outgrow his Jewish culture. He was accused time and again of doing this, breaking the Sabbath. And he makes the point over and over again, the Sabbath was made for humans, humans were not made for the Sabbath.

The church is made for humans, humans are not made for the church. Religion is made for humans, humans are not made for religion. Humans are greater than religion. Human being is greater than religion. Religion is the womb. We have made it the tomb. And so what is happening out there in this beautiful world of ours, everybody is fighting from their womb, existence. My religion is better than your religion. We've got fundamentalism going crazy out there. Listen, we are talking about a really vital gospel message in this form of life that Francis has given us, to show the world what it is to live in the new creation as the beloved daughters and sons of God. Where everyone is precious in the eyes of God, where everyone's inner life is the true space from which to live. People don't know it. They think they have to serve religion, instead of religion serving them.

It is really a tragic reality in today's world, especially here in the west, it is the greatest need. People no longer experience their need of God because materially we are quite well supplied. In the past, as sisters, we served the material needs of the people, the social needs, the needs for education and we continue to do that to some degree today. But the greater need is for people to come into the freedom of the new creation. And we can't show people what it's like if we are not living it ourselves. So to be a daughter of God is the first call of the Franciscan way of life. A daughter of God, a son of God.

The life of penance that Francis preached and that we all espouse, and it's very much a part of your essential identity, you speak about being sisters of penance, it's simply the process by which one allows the Christ nature to unfold. That's what it is. That's all it is. We allow the Christ nature that we have inherited, we allow it to unfold. And it means, somehow or another, every day making the choice for our true identity rather than the separate ego that keeps playing us. The separate ego remains a separate being. A son and daughter of God is in union, always in communion with God and with each other.

Now when Clare and her sisters went to the monastery at San Damiano (I mean it wasn't what you see when you go to Assisi now with all things fixed and added on that all happened, most of it in Clare's lifetime she obviously had good taste). That lovely chapel, with those lovely arches, she designed that. She may not have drawn them on the map but she was the one to make sure that was built. Not the original chapel Francis repaired, I mean the refectory, you know the dining room and the lovely patristic

arch, oh it is gorgeous, that was all her idea. Holy poverty! She didn't stinge when it came to making the place a place of beauty, she did that and the brothers were there too but their life was essentially to try and create a way of being where the sign of the new creation was visible for all to see. And the sign of the new creation is relationship. Mutual union of mind and heart is how she described it over and over again. Union of mind and heart. Now this is not a human possibility. Have you ever tried it? Community (oh, my God!) it's not a human possibility. It is only possible through the Spirit of God among us. The work of grace among us.

And the way we open ourselves to the Spirit of God so that we can be transformed into a communion of love which is a pure work of the spirit is through our life of prayer. (Which we will look at later.) The point we need to clear up now is that the form of life for us as Franciscans is not rules, it's not horariums, it's not structures, it's not common life, and it's not common dress. It has nothing to do with any of these things for Franciscans. The form of life for us Franciscans is we live the new Creation of mutual loving relationship in God. We live that because each of us knows ourselves as a beloved daughter. We need no other rules except beloved Father/Mother however you understand the Creator God. This mutual love, I live out of it. I know I'm loved, I know I'm forgiven, I know I'm beautiful in the eyes of God. That's what Clare says to Agnes in her second letter. "God sees no imperfection in you. God has adorned you with such beauty." She said that to Agnes because the Pope was giving Agnes a rotten time, Pope Gregory IX. He kept writing letters to her saying she was getting everything wrong. So Agnes wrote to Clare asking, 'what am I suppose to do here?' Clare writes back and says that in God's eyes you are perfect, you are beautiful, forget that other stuff. Just remember the Spirit, the gift God has given you, live from that. Don't worry. Then Clare goes into the lovely poem, "What you hold may you always hold, what you do, may you always do and never abandon. With swift pace, light step and unswerving feet move forward joyfully, securely and happily on this path." Never mind that other stuff. This is a complete new reality Clare was talking about. We don't constrict ourselves to this 'must' and 'should' stuff. This is Franciscanism! Go for it! It's great!

Questions:

1. "To be a daughter [son] of God is the first call of the Franciscan way of life." What does it mean *to me/us* to be a "daughter [son] of God"?
2. "For Francis and for Clare, the bottom line is relationship ... Everything is relationship because God is relationship: Father, Son and Spirit." How did Clare live this relationship of mutual love, of mutual indwelling? How do I/we?
3. How can I/we live in this new creation "where everyone is precious in the eyes of God, where everyone's inner life is the true space from which to live? What would it look like for me/us to "walk [this] talk"?