

## Briege O'Hare Retreat, Stella Niagara, August 10-13, 2005

**Session One** (The initial words of the talk are not available as the audio system had not yet connected.)

...about the nature of the charism of Francis – Francis' closet friends, Leo Angelo, Rufino, where did they all go to spend most of their time? They were living with Clare. They went to Clare because she was the nearest thing they could find to Francis. She was the one who truly understood his meaning, his way. So we need her. But we also need a Clare for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We don't want a 13<sup>th</sup> century Clare. We have a lot to learn from her story, but we have to interpret her story for our time. She is an embodiment of women's Franciscanism; that's what she is, a kind of archetype of the female Franciscan soul which we all share.

Clare lived in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, but we just can't read her historically. We have to read her mythologically. That's how I will read her to you, to see in her story spiritual truths for ourselves for now, in this time. So we have to read her differently from how she read herself. A great theorist on hermeneutics, Paul Ricoeur, has a marvelous way of explaining hermeneutics. When speaking of classical texts, I often quote him, the text means what it means to the person who wrote it and it means what it means to the person who reads it. In other words these rich, very inspired texts need to be re-understood with every century, every passing age. We have to see Clare in a way that even she herself would not have understood in terms of the externalization of her charism which she would have understood spiritually. She would say, "yes, you've got it girl, you've got it!"

The need for today as I see it is that we are living in an extraordinary time, as you know. One of the things that I am convinced about when I read Clare is, and please don't be put off by this word, I can't think of another. I have to use it; there is a great need for human beings to connect with the mystical dimension of themselves. I'm sure you're very familiar with the person who said, I think it's Karl Rahner who said, "The only Christians in the future will be mystics." He says that in the coming age we must all become mystics or we will be nothing at all.

We need only to look around to see that our societies are plagued with religion. It's religion that's dividing us all. We've got this awful insidious thing of religious fundamentalism in all its forms in every religious creed including our own. We have the opposite which is soul destroying secularism, a kind of endless hedonism which even has hit the old country, Catholic Ireland. In parts of so called "Catholic" Ireland only 1 percent of the people ever attend Mass. (You are more Christian than we are in Ireland, I can tell you that.) There's a lot more "religion" in America though so you need to be more careful. It can be very soul destroying. The reason is because it's so external – practice and culture. What it's doing is drawing people away from their inner being. It's making them almost idolatrous, living by externals, creating doctrines, holding up the Bible and "it says this and it says that". So what! We've got to find another reality which is the life of the Spirit of God in every human being. This is the unique manifestation of the Divine in every human being. It doesn't matter what kind of a religion you come from. This is where the Spirit of God is moving. There is an enormous shift in human consciousness happening and we need a woman like Clare because she really got this. She understood this, she told us before she died. She said, "Our mission in the world is to be mirrors." That's what she said. And what is a mirror, someone who reflects back to people what they truly are. Because people are in utter confusion. They are lost trying the follow creeds and ideologies and political ideologies. They are losing connection with who they truly are which is the beautiful children of God, every one of us. And we as Franciscans women according to Clare, our job is to be mirrors. So when they look at us they see how beautiful they are. That means we have to be real beautiful. We have to be people who are in this beautiful freedom of life of the Spirit of God. Then people will discover that in themselves. So that is what she said we are.

Now your own Thomas Merton, wonderful man, says the only cure for the present angst of humanity is mysticism. I'm using this word mysticism very deliberately because we have scary overtones around it. We think of people like John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, six feet off the ground and in a rapture, and things like that and we forget every one of us is a mystic at heart. Every single one of us has a capacity to connect with the Divine directly and to live from that. It's just a matter of learning how, discovering it and Clare can teach us that. So we need her.

There is an interesting guy here in the United States, I've only just come across a book he'd written. His name is Frank Tuoti and his book is called, Why Not Be a Mystic? I want to quote a couple of things he says. He says for the first thirteen centuries or so of Christianity (that is up to the time of Clare and Francis) contemplation was considered the normal goal and development of the Christian life. It was normal for everybody, for both religious and laity. However following the Reformation and into the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Age of Reason, and the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Age of Enlightenment, the contemplative heritage of the church was displaced by excessive rational thinking and an overworked speculative theology that became 'the faith'. And I love this little comment he makes, "and this disease is still with us." It's a disease. This whole thing of speculative theology, rational thinking, (we need to be rational and we need to think) but when we are talking about the gospel life it is something much greater than that, it is discovering a whole new way of being. That is what Francis and Clare were about. They were of the new creation.

Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians, "Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old one is gone." It's over, finished! And the new one is now here. That is what we are about, as missionaries. We are here to show people the new creation. And it's not going to be found in the brain. It just isn't. So we have to get out of that. He goes on to say this, "since the Middle Ages the Western Church (every time I say western, I don't mean California. I mean everything from Russia over to California) The Western Church has often proffered a stale and nutritionless substitute for the living waters of contemplation. It has come to us pre-packaged and carefully filtered. A diet of dried declarations and statements that we are asked and indeed sometime told to chew upon until spiritual sclerosis clogs the arteries of our hearts. Many are the sins of the Church over the centuries until this present day but none of those sins compares to the sine of restricting her children to a diet of tasteless spiritual morsels cooked up in the ovens of left brain theology."

We have something to give to this poor, pathetic Church we have. I love the Church, I'm somewhat of a rebel though I am, but we have to be. We as Franciscan women have a new message for today and it is coming straight down the line from Clare. It is bringing people into the true beautiful nature as human beings. This is why Clare's favorite metaphor is the mirror. Look, look, and see who you are! You are beautiful! See who you are in Christ, discover your true being.

There is a Jesuit in Northern Ireland where I come from, William Johnston in whose book, Arise My Love, he speaks of the need for a new mysticism. Some of what he says is so important because this is where it is at for us a Franciscan women. What we need to bring to our thirsty, hungry people and misguided people and people who are trapped in such soul destroying ideologies that they are serving, instead of living in the freedom of God's Holy Spirit. Johnston says, "A new mysticism is necessary for our day. We need holistic mystics who will teach us to embrace both matter and spirit." Mysticism of the past is referred to as neoplatonic.

Clare was tormented by Mother Church that she be a neo-platonic mystic, but did not put it in this language. The neoplatonic approach of the past is based on the crude belief that your body is bad and your spirit is good. Therefore, anything to do with your body you crush; your senses are to be shut down so that your spirit can take off. That is the basic principle. Trouble is it never worked for women; it never did; it seems to work for some men though I do not understand how! Maybe they are pretending. I don't know, it sure

doesn't work for us! Johnston goes on to say about this, "We need a mysticism of the earth. We need a mysticism of the human body, a mysticism of sexuality, a mysticism of science." This is all new thinking. This is where we need to go. Clare would not have understood these things, about a mysticism of science, but there is so much in Clare that answers this.

Johnston says that by all means we must preserve and develop the apophatic mystical tradition. The apophatic mystical tradition has to do with the way of darkness, the way of negation, 'the nada, nada, nada' of John of the Cross. We do need to preserve that and I understand and agree with that. Clare has that in her spirituality. Johnston says that the apophatic must join hands with the cataphatic mysticism of light. This appeals more to women. We hear of Catherine of Siena, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila. He forgot Clare of Assisi but we put her in there, too. The Mysticism of Light is what the world needs today. Here, the theology of negation is little in evidence. The feminine mysticism which emphasizes the earth comes to the fore. This feminine dimension will more and more predominate as the century progresses.

Johnston also said that we need the mysticism of science. Theilard de Chardin discovered that contrary to Augustine who said that all things point to God. Chardin discovered that God is present in all things. When at a conference with Jesuits, in Ireland, this was said of Theilard. I wanted to clarify one thing so I interjected that it was not Chardin, that was Duns Scotus. It's from Dun Scotus that we get the understanding that everything is a manifestation of the Divine.

We need to bring this to the people. We need to be woman who know how to encounter the Divine in everything in creation. Clare knew how to do this. She used to say to her sisters, "every time you go out that door and into the town". (Whenever I'm talking with some enclosed Poor Clares in monasteries, and I start off with that quote they say, "every time you what?" She said every time you go out into the town you praise God for every flower, every tree and for every beautiful thing. They say, 'we didn't know she let them out'. I tell them, yes, they went out definitely, that is what she said. Johnston also says, "We need a mystical theology that listens to the masses of the people who are hungry and oppressed." This is so important. To know how to be present with the poor in a mystical consciousness. Because we as Franciscans women embody their hope. We embody the reality that there is another dimension to themselves and that when they connect with us they connect with that and it gives them hope. It's a mysticism that listens to the voices of Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, and it must listen to Liberation Theology. Because this will bring us down from the neoplatonic heavens to the good earth. This is so important. That is why we in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Order need you to get us down from the neoplatonic heavens to the good earth. Because you are out there. You are with these people. You are working and serving the poor in such wonderful ways. We need you to compliment what we are about and hopefully we may have something to compliment you in return. We really need each other.

I want to mention one prophecy, a prophecy about the coming of Clare. We want to get into the story a little bit. There was a prophecy about her coming, before she was born. It's kind of interesting, there were two prophecies about the coming of Clare and actually, there weren't any prophecies about the coming of Francis. I think the Holy Spirit had a reason for that, which we'll get to see.

This is the first prophecy and it's actually Clare's own mother who experienced it when she was pregnant with Clare. She went into a church to pray for a safe delivery of her child. In those days child mortality at birth was very high as was mothers also died giving birth. So she was frightened and she went to pray. This is what the sources tell us. I'm reading from the Legend of Clare, it says, "while the pregnant woman, already near delivery, was attentively praying to the Crucified before the cross to bring her safely through the danger of childbirth, she heard a voice saying to her, 'Do not be afraid woman for you will give birth in safety to a light, which will give light more clearly than light itself.' We all know that is why she is called

Clare, which means brightness. Notice, 'she will be a light who will give light more clearly than light itself.' This is a prophecy about the coming of Clare but it's a prophecy about the vocation of Franciscan women. This is who we are. We are women who give light. That is who we are! And the light that we give is that we reveal to people who they are, who they are in God.

The second prophecy was Francis when he was asked by God to restore the church, which we know he interpreted to mean the little church of San Damiano. We have this lovely picture describe in Clare's Testament. She describes it. I can just see, there's Francis he has just gone through this conversion. He's asked to fix up this ruined church and he hasn't a clue as to why he is fixing it up. He is probably saying, why am I fixing up this church? Then he gets this extraordinary revelation. Now notice the language, this is Clare's own testament. "Almost immediately after his conversion", now notice the subtle little thing she puts in here, "when Francis had neither brothers nor companions". This is significant, this was before there was an order of friars minor, he had neither brothers nor companions and he was fixing the church, "while he was building the church of San Damiano where he was totally visited by Divine consolation and impelled to completely abandon the world," through the great joy and enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, the holy man made a prophecy about us, the women. It's about us, all of us and which the Lord later fulfilled. And then Clare gives the story about the prophecy. "At that time, climbing the wall of that church, Francis shouted in French to some poor people who were standing nearby, 'Come and help me in the work of building San Damiano because ladies will dwell here and glorify the heavenly Father throughout his holy universal church by their celebrated and holy manner of life.'

The translation is probably accurate in terms of literal translation but I think it probably reads better if we were to say it like this. "Come and help me repair this church because women are coming." (Notice that Francis has no message from God about the guys!) He didn't know there were going to be men. He only was told by the Holy Spirit to get things ready for the women who were coming. Why? Because 'these women by the way they live life would reveal God to the world by their celebrated and holy manner of life.' Now this is for all of us; this is our mission. The way we do life reveals the nature of God to the world. What a mission we have; what a challenge! This is our call and Clare is the woman who will show us how. Clare the light!

Introduction to the CD: The text is from the first letter of John where he's speaking about his discovery of who God is and he uses this wonderful tactile language, "Something exists which has existed from the beginning that we have seen, that we have touched with our hands, the Word who is life; this is our story. And we are telling you what we have seen. John makes this great proclamation, God is light! God is light! Now notice that prophecy of Clare. She would be light which gives light that is greater than light itself. Why? She reveals God! John goes on to say if we live in this light then we are in union with each other. We don't have to be "trying" to love people. We don't have to be struggling to "do" community. We are just in union with each other because we're in the light of God. The secret is getting in the Light and all the rest happens. All the rest really does happen because everyone is in the Light. It doesn't mean that we don't have personality difference. That's not the deal! It's above all that. There is an experience of the Divine among us. That's Gospel community. It's something way beyond group dynamics, psychology and everything else. Let's meditate on John's words, "God is Light." (end of session 1)

### **Questions:**

1. What does "mysticism" mean to me/us?
2. What does Clare teach me/us about "mysticism"?
3. How can I/we grow to be a "mystic" in this 21st century?