

Session 6 – Briege O’Hare Clare of Assisi Retreat, August 2005 – Stella Niagara

We are going to look at what is one of the central themes of Franciscan Spirituality, this theme of living a life led by the Spirit of the Lord and the Spirit’s holy manner of working. St. Clare in Chapter 7 of her rule is speaking about work and the work that the sisters do. They must work in such a way that while they vanish idleness, the enemy of the soul, they do not extinguish the spirit of holy prayer and devotion to which all other things of our earthly existence must contribute.

I don’t know how this strikes you coming from your life style, we’re there for work, for our ministry, that’s what consumes most of our life and energy. Where possible we manage to get some prayer in. That seems to be how it works for us. I stand here as someone who is in no position to make any judgment but I get the impression that is often how it is for sisters in ministry. I don’t think Clare meant this simply for, so called, Poor Clares because they didn’t exist at the time, she simply knew herself as a Franciscan woman. I think she was trying to make the point that everything in our lives only makes sense in the context of prayer. Prayer is our life. Prayer in the sense of living a life tuned into the Spirit of God is our life.

In chapter 10 of her rule she said, “Let those who do not know how to read (she quotes a lot of Francis here) should not be eager to learn. Let them rather devote themselves to what they should desire to have above all else, the Spirit of the Lord and the Spirit’s holy manner of working and to pray always to the Spirit with a pure heart and to have humility and patience in difficulty and infirmity and to love those who persecute, blame and accuse us.”

Now what Clare is saying is that if you’re not very smart it doesn’t matter much. If you can’t read, don’t worry about it; don’t think you have to learn. Of course today most of us are reasonably literate. Still I think we can make the mistake of thinking that to be intellectually informed somehow puts us on a grade a little higher than those who are not and this is wrong. The Spirit is not all that impressed by our intellects. It does not mean we don’t need good theology. We need the service of good theologians. We can’t be without them. Theologians are the people who save us from living in constricted narrow interpretations of the Scriptures. They are the people who save us from falling into the folly of sentimental devotionism. We need them and they serve us well. I am not dismissing that. When it comes to that journey of life back to our true origins in God the intellect does not have all that big a role to play. It has to do with what Clare is talking about, what she speaks of.

The first thing Clare speaks of is prayer; she says to pray always with a pure heart, to have humility, patience in difficulty and in infirmity and to love those who persecute and blame us. This is the spiritual way. This is the way of the Spirit, it’s quite different. So let’s try to get some understanding of this. I’ll give you a word from St. Francis on it, in his twelfth admonition, he’s defining how to discern whether one has the Spirit of the Lord in one’s life. This is his definition. “A servant of God may be recognized as possessing the Spirit of the Lord in this way, if the flesh does not pride itself when the Lord performs some good work through you.” Since the flesh, that is to say the ego, is always opposed to every good. Rather, “she considers herself to be more worthless in her own eyes and esteems herself less than all others.” I don’t think it’s the most glamorous interpretation of what it is to have the Spirit of the Lord, but it’s the true one. The ego and all its achievements, that is to say its dead skins, only drive us away from the life of the Spirit. The only thing that keeps us sure in following the Spirit of the Lord, is the same as what Clare mentions, that we do not take any pride in the good that God does through us, but that we have a very humble attitude toward ourselves and others.

Let me first quote a prayer from Francis about this and then we will get into more work on this topic. Francis includes his letter to the entire Order with a prayer we all are familiar with, "Almighty, eternal, just and merciful God, grant us in our misery the grace to do for You alone what we know you want us to do and always to desire what pleases you. Thus, inwardly cleansed, interiorly enlightened, and enflamed by the fire of the Holy Spirit we may be able to follow in the footprints of Your Beloved Son our Lord Jesus Christ and by Your grace alone, may we make our way back to You." What he is saying is that it is the Spirit of God that enables us to make our way back to where we came from, that's our life in God. What we were talking about this morning. It is a work of the Spirit. Understanding it intellectually is helpful but it gets us nowhere. It is the work of the Spirit.

Let us see how this actually did apply in the life of Clare. We looked at the fourth letter of Clare to Agnes earlier. Now we will take some time with her second letter which is always called the letter of fidelity to the Spirit. The context of this letter helps us to see what she is teaching Agnes. It was written around the year 1235. It was around this time that Agnes of Prague, she was established in her monastery in Prague and in communication with Clare she already had at least one letter from Clare, but there may have been others. She had written to Gregory X, the famous Hugolino, to get his permission to establish her monastery. He sent her his Hugolino Rule and he said to her in his cover letter with the Rule, this is the life that Clare and her sisters are living at San Damiano. Agnes believed him! So she tried to live this Hugoline lifestyle.

I don't think she was very happy in it but she was so inspired by the friars and Francis that she thought if this is what I have to do, I'll do it. But it wasn't working for her. She must have written to Clare and heard from Clare and she began to catch on that what Clare was living was the form of life that Francis gave her. I quoted this to you the other day and have actually been working our way through it. The first section was "You have made yourselves daughters of the Most High, Our Heavenly Father" and what it means to be a daughter of God. "You have taken the Spirit as you Spouse" and we are looking at that now, and this morning we looked at the third one, "choosing to live according to the perfection of the Holy Gospel." For us as Franciscans the interpretation of that is to walk in the footprints of Jesus in his poverty, humility, and obedient love so that we can become transformed into our participation into the Deity, the Divine Life.

So Clare obviously was communicating to Agnes that she was living something quite different from what Pope Gregory had given to her. So Agnes wrote again to the Pope. Basically her message to Gregory the IX was that she had just discovered that she had been 'taken for a little bit of a ride' (fooled and tricked). What you sent me as a rule is not what Clare's living at all. So I want permission from you to live the form of life that Francis gave to Clare. That's the Franciscan life for women and that's the one I want to live. Gregory, for some reason was not pleased by that letter so he wrote back to Agnes and he said you've got it wrong. It is true that Clare has been living that form of life that Francis gave to her but that was only to get her started off. "That's like milk for babies" was his expression. Now what I have sent you, the rule I have written that is good solid food. So you stay with it and forget what Clare's doing. She wrote back and said 'I don't think I can go along with that because I'm very inspired by this form of life that Clare and her sisters are living.'

These letters were going back and forth all the time so Gregory writes back again and he says, 'the one who is advising you, that person is very zealous but that same person is not very wise. The rule I gave you is the correct rule for you and I'm telling you to live it.' Now I have paraphrased this but this is what these

letters amounted to. That was a direct quote, “The one who is advising you, that person is very zealous but that person is not very wise.” Maria Pia Alberzoni goes on at length to try to discover who the Pope is referring to and she assumes that it is either Clare or Brother Elias. You will see why in a moment.

Agnes must have written to Clare in distress. She was feeling upset, obviously feeling very put down by the Holy See and she was feeling very confused in her conscience because the Pope was telling her to do one thing and her heart and spirit were telling her something else. And it was in that context that Clare wrote this second letter back to Agnes. And Clare, being the wonderful spiritual director that she is, begins with this lovely sentence (now imagine Agnes feeling very downhearted and possibly feeling diminished in herself because of what was happening). This is what Clare said, “I give thanks to the Giver of Life and of grace, from whom we believe every good and perfect gift proceeds because He has adorned you with such splendors of virtue and illuminated you with such marks of perfection and since you have become such a diligent imitator of the Father of all perfection you might be made perfect and His eyes do not see anything imperfect in you.” If Clare were Irish she would be saying, “Look Darling, you’re beautiful. God loves you. You are perfect in the eyes of God. Forget himself in Rome; what he thinks is not the point. She was telling Agnes to connect again with her true being. Somehow Clare had the power to help people to do this.

There is the lovely story in the life of Francis when he and Brother Leo had been on a preaching mission which went pretty badly. Things were not always 100% successful for Francis, and he and Leo were walking home at night very tired and disheartened and Francis fell into a depression. And Leo was quite worried about him. Francis was silent for a long time as they walked under the moonlight. Eventually they came to a well and they stopped to drink. Francis bent over the well to get some water into his hands so that he could drink it and he stopped and he said, “Leo, come here. Look into the well. Whose reflection do you see?” So Leo looked in and he said, “Oh, I can see the moon! I can see the moon in there.” And Francis said, “No, I can see the face of the Lady Clare.” And his spirits just lifted. All his depression left him immediately. Now this is because he remembered her. He remembered how she always reflected back to him the true beauty of his spiritual nature. And he reconnected with it again and his depression left him.

So Clare is doing the same thing here for Agnes. She goes on to say this, (remembering Agnes’ problem) “Since I know that you are adorned with many virtues, I will spare my words and not weary you with needless speech even though nothing seems superfluous to you if you can draw some consolation from it. Because one thing is necessary. I bear witness to that. You see what she is doing. Clare is holding the work of the Spirit in herself, Clare, as a witness. “Because one thing is necessary and I bear witness to that, and I encourage you for love of Him to whom you have offered yourself as a holy and pleasing sacrifice that, like another Rachel, you always remember your resolution and be conscious of your beginning.” What she’s saying is, remember the grace of God in you, be conscious of your beginning, remember what the Spirit of God awakened in you when you made the decision to enter, whatever, the form of monastic life she was living. Remember how God worked in you, what is it that inspired you, that set you on fire, because that’s the one thing necessary that you hold on to it.

That’s why Clare goes on with the text that you all know so well, “What you hold, may you always hold, what you do, may you always do, and never abandon, etc. etc. You know all of that. Notice her language, “not believing anything, not agreeing with anything that would dissuade you from this resolution.” She is very, very strong here, that even appeals from the Holy See to live in a particular way does not take precedent over the workings of grace in your Spirit. She continues even stronger. “In all of this,” she says,

“follow the counsel of our venerable Father, our Brother Elias the Minister General.” In other words, he is the one you listen to because he is the one, who in Clare’s eyes, she believed he truly kept faithful to the vision of Francis.

There is a lot of study going on about Elias at the moment, he has been very much misrepresented we are told. Clare obviously had great faith in him so she is telling Agnes to be guided by him. In other works, not by Gregory IX. Then she says, “Prize this advice beyond the advice of others and cherish it as dear to you as any gift and if anyone (most scholars would agree this is a direct reference to Gregory IX) if anyone would tell you something that would hinder your perfection or seem contrary to your divine vocation, even though you must respect him, do not follow his counsel. But as a poor virgin embrace the poor Christ.” What she is doing here is telling Agnes that the life of the Spirit among us takes precedence over all other authorities for want of a better word. Clare is very, very strong in this. Elias, in Alberzoni’s work, at this time in 1234, had been the Minister General and was strongly supporting Clare and Agnes in living the original form of life given by Francis and in opposing them being part of Gregory’s Order.

Elias stood by them even though Gregory at this stage had forced Clare to accept his rule. Clare received the Privilege of Poverty as the only compromise to get out of it. But Elias continued to support her and Alberzoni would maintain that it’s possible that the reason Elias was deposed as Minister General was because of his support for Clare. The brothers disagreed with Elias supporting Clare. They wanted to do the “big time” stuff that Gregory was directing them in. Alberzoni was saying that it is almost certain that the reason Elias was excommunicated because he had been ordered by Gregory IX not to visit Clare and not to support her in her project. And he disobeyed that order. He continued to visit Clare and not to support her in her project and he disobeyed that order. He continued to visit Clare and it was for this, Alberzoni believes, that he was excommunicated. And indeed there is some speculation that Clare also was excommunicated for her disobedience. So that still needs to be researched. At the moment, that is dismissed by most scholars. But at least we have to let the question be open as a possibility.

Now all of this relates to what was in that period a truly critical reality for Clare and her sisters, and Agnes and her sisters. Do we follow the Spirit of the Lord and the Spirit’s holy activity or do we crush that for the sake of an ideology of obedience? It is not an easy thing to resolve and I am not pretending that we can. It is important to be aware that this struggle existed for these women as well. Clare placed obedience to the Spirit above everything else and so did Francis.

In fact, Francis really defined himself and his Order as simply people who lived a life led by the Spirit of the Lord. Listen to some of the things, he really didn’t have a notion of actually founding a fraternity as such. At the time of Francis, religious life was always understood as *Vita Apostolica*, the life of the apostles. It was always understood as a way of imitating the apostles, living like the apostles, and there were two interpretations of what that meant. One was that you gather around Jesus like the apostles did, a kind of Benedictine liturgical form of life. The other was you went out preaching as the apostles did which was more the Canons of Augustine and these types of Orders of that time.

When Francis came along he rejected that whole definition of religious life, certainly for himself and his brothers and sisters. He defined his Order not in terms of an apostolic life, but in terms of living the Gospel life, walking in the footprints of Jesus. The reason is that he understood this way of poverty where we identify with Christ, because that’s who we are; we are the Christ. We follow his way of poverty, humility and obedience. We can’t do that by deciding to do it. We can’t say I’m going to do that starting tomorrow.’ We can’t do that. It is only the Spirit of God that can make it possible. This is why Francis says, “Let the

brothers pay attention, so what they must desire above all else is to have the Spirit of the Lord and the Spirit's holy activity." That is submission to the movement of the Spirit.

Francis seems to imply that there are two conditions under the ways we must observe this. The first is the way of radical poverty. That we abandon ourselves to this way of poverty, humility and love. The second is the way of contemplation. Francis doesn't use the word contemplation. Clare does. He only uses active types of words like adoration, praise, thanksgiving; for him, that is contemplation. For Francis they are the fundamental attitudes of how we are as Franciscan people. In my experience, in our life as a community at home, to be led by the Spirit of the Lord is not a personal experience only. I remember once having an abbess and I was trying to persuade her to do something I wanted to do and I said 'well this is what the Holy Spirit has given me to do'. She said, 'well that's OK Brieger, but your Holy Spirit is different from my Holy Spirit' and my Holy Spirit says that you're not to do it'. So where do you go with that? This is why one can misinterpret these texts so much as I was doing then.

To be led by the Holy Spirit is a community experience. It is not a personal revelation, as such. It's always in the context of the fraternity in men's Orders, the sisterhood among us. Letting the Spirit lead us and guide us together. That is our obedience. Does this mean that the Spirit does not speak directly to my heart? Possibly. But I know that in our community, if we feel the Spirit has spoken directly to our hearts the first thing we do is tell the community so they can discern whether it is indeed of the Spirit or not. If they decide it's not we let go of it. The reason for this is because the Gospel life is always a life of communion – communion in the Trinity and communion with one another. The Spirit only operates upon us as a communion. Clare believed this very strongly and that is why the sisters had to gather every week to hear the Spirit together. It is the Spirit also who forms us into the image of God. We can't decide to be the beautiful divine image that we know we are inside, we can't decide to let it out, we can agree that it is what we would desire but we must open ourselves so that the Spirit might make this happen. And that only comes through contemplation.

So when Clare was writing to Agnes, she was writing out of a sisterhood experience to a sisterhood experience in Prague. It wasn't just two individuals, she had discerned with her sisters what the way of life the gospel is for them and she was writing to Agnes for her and her sisters confirming them in what they had already discerned was true for them, confirming her and supporting her in that.

I think we have a great challenge here in this whole mystery of living a life led by the Spirit. I think the heart of it is the sign of love among us. I know in my community we have arguments, we have disagreements, we get on each other's nerves, we have personality clashes – all the usual human things, but we know we love each other. We know that. Because we know it is not a love of human affectivity, though it may engage us at that level, but it doesn't originate at that level. It originates from the life of the Spirit among us who each of us honestly desires above all else. It is a miraculous thing how the Spirit can bind us together in love. So let us reflect on this whole thing of communion because the Spirit always works to create communion, communion of the Trinity and communion in one another.

We are going to have a song that actually is in the prologue of your own Rule taken from the Letter to the Faithful where Francis speaks about the Trinity and about what this life in the Spirit is like. It is in the Prologue of your Rule and it sums it up very well. "We must not be wise and prudent according to the flesh. (That echoes what Clare said, If you can't read don't worry about it.) Rather we must be simple, humble and pure. And let us hold ourselves in contempt and scorn since through our own fault all of us are miserable and contemptible vermin and worms." (The language sounds awful, but it's true. The

phenomenal self, the ego, really is only these things. They are very good images because the ego keeps pulling us away from our true being). “We must never desire to be above others, rather we must be servants and subject to every human creature for God’s sake.” And when he has finished saying all that he adds, “And upon all men and women if they have done these things and have persevered to the end, the Spirit of the Lord will rest and the Spirit will make her home and dwelling among them. And these people will be children of the heavenly Father whose works they do. And they are spouses, mothers, and brothers of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are spouses when the faithful soul is joined to Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit.” The only way we can reclaim our Christ nature is by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit does it. “We are brothers when we do the will of the Father who is in heaven.” Then Francis goes into that lovely, wonderful praise of the life of communion. “How glorious, how holy and great it is to have a Father in heaven. How holy, consoling, beautiful and wondrous to have a spouse (the Spirit) and how holy, loving, pleasing, humble, peaceful and loveable and desirable above all things to have such a brother and such a son as Jesus who gave his life for us.” It is this life of communion that the Spirit is nurturing in us. Everything else can be very deceptive – a lot of New Age spirituality is kind of ‘lone ranger’ stuff, with direct intervention between God and me. It is not the gospel way.

Let’s listen to the words of Francis, #8, “Oh, How Wonderful.”

Questions:

1. Share an encounter I/you have had with Christ?
2. How have this/these encounters transformed my/your life?
3. How do I/you allow myself/yourself to be led by the Spirit of God?