

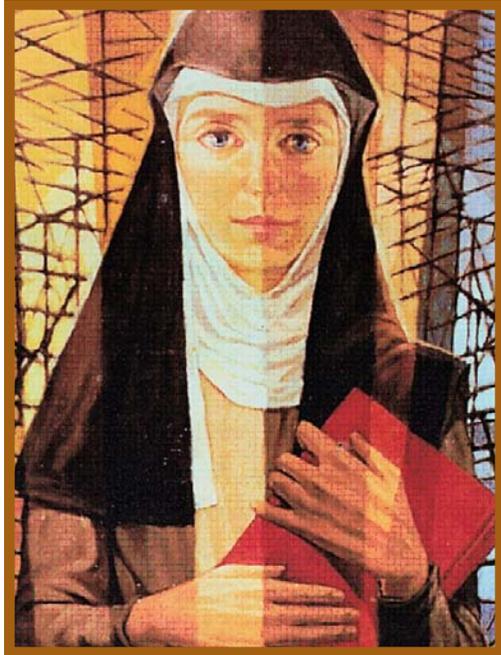
The Spirit of Secular Franciscan Life

Newsletter for Secular Franciscans - Assumption BVM Province

August 2009 - No. 22

ST. CLARE...

New Woman of the Spoleto Valley



St. Clare of Assisi, First Franciscan Woman
Poor Clare Monastery, Malta

Note: I have received a number of e-mail corrections and additions and put the changes into the SFO data base. As we know nothing ever works perfectly. If errors persist, please don't hesitate to let me know. Also I get a number of returns on Newsletters sent by surface mail. Address changes are made where possible; otherwise the address is deleted from our files. As always I hope no one is missed.

August 11 is the Feast of St. Clare of Assisi. It is important to give attention to Clare and her unique role in the Franciscan story for the best insight into Francis is through this first Franciscan woman. After Francis died, she carried on his vision: poverty, life of prayer, penance, ongoing conversion, service, love, healing ... like none of the others. The Brothers would come to her for spiritual direction. She understood.

Clare was born in 1193, in the upper section of Assisi, of a noble and wealthy family. As Francis was stirring up the town with his gospel life, Clare herself became attracted to join Francis and in 1212 left her family by

stealth in order to do so. Eventually Francis settled her into San Damiano, together with the first women who joined her community. Clare lived the ideals of the gospel in the spirit of St. Francis until she died in 1253, some 27 years after Francis.

Perhaps the best insight into Clare, and what she accomplished, is to examine briefly the qualities of her leadership, a leadership that gave birth to an entirely new and refreshing look at women, at society, and at the Church of her era. She "lighted up" the world of her time. Her Bull of Canonization used 19 different words for "light," which is the meaning of her name. She was called the New Woman of the Spoleto Valley. We look at three qualities of her leadership that stand out.

First Quality: Servant Leadership. A great leader is seen as a servant first, which is the key to the leader's greatness. A great leader is servant first because that is what he or she is deep down inside. One's servant nature is the real person; it is not bestowed, not assumed, and cannot be taken away. This differs sharply from one who is leader first, on whom the position is bestowed, who then maybe grows into being a servant.

The "servant first" quality makes sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test is: Do those served grow as persons? Are they healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous? And what is the effect on the least privileged in society?

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Secular Franciscans should seek to live in life-giving reciprocal communion with all the members of the Franciscan family. They should be ready to promote common initiatives or participate in them with the religious of the First, Second and Third Orders, with Secular Institutes, and with other lay ecclesial groups that recognize Francis as a model and inspiration in order to work together to spread the Gospel, ...

Clare was, undoubtedly, a servant first. Although from aristocracy, she instinctively mothered her sisters, and all who came to San Damiano, with compassion and healing and love. All grew into reflections of the gospel.

Second Quality: Respect and Equality. Clare created a city of equal ladies at San Damiano. All classes of women were welcome and made to feel one. This was a radical stance for her time. She provided a new image and dignity for women, a new model of religious life. As we absorb this we feel a new breath of air, a kind of new light, a new place, a new city of God. This grew out of respect towards all: rich, poor, sick, uneducated, middle class. All were equal in the sight of God and thus in the vision of Clare.



Francis and Clare share a meal near the Porziuncola. Artist: Piero Casentini

Third Quality: A Contemplative, Listening Spirit. Nurturing a prayerful, contemplative spirit might be the most important quality for a leader, for it gives

birth to a listening stance towards others. A contemplative spirit teaches one to listen. It anchors the person concerning the vision and goals of the group. It keeps clarifying the focus of life and one's institution (or family), maintaining a single-hearted perspective. A contemplative spirit develops strong roots. As a contemplative Clare was very clear about her way of life and instilled this foundation in her sisters.

Such qualities are needed in today's world. As members of the Secular Franciscan family we can learn from Clare.

NOTE: The Rule for the Poor Clares begins: The form of life of the Order of the Poor Sisters is this: to observe the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

SFO RULE 4: The rule and life of the Secular Franciscans is this: to observe the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by following the example of Saint Francis of Assisi, who made Christ the inspiration and the center of his life with God and people.

SFO RULE 1: The Franciscan family, as one among many spiritual families raised up by the Holy Spirit in the Church, unites all members of the people of God - laity, religious, and priests - who recognize that they are called to follow Christ in the footsteps of St. Francis of Assisi. In various ways and forms but in life-giving union with each other, they intend to make present the charism of their common Seraphic Father in the life and mission of the Church.

SFO RULE 5: Secular Franciscans, therefore, should seek to encounter the living and active person of Christ in their brothers and sisters, in Sacred Scripture, in the Church, and in liturgical activity.

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Published by:

Fr. Roch Niemier, OFM

Provincial Spiritual Assistant

9230 W. Highland Park Ave. - Franklin, WI 53132

414.349-6851

email - roch@ofm-abvm.org.

Layout and design: Patrick McCormack, OFM