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Presentation

N. 62 of “*Communion and Communication*” is closed, when we have already celebrated the eighth centenary of the approval of the *Regula bullata* and not yet that of the Greccio Nativity.

In this issue we will listen and reflect upon the first verse of the *Words with melody* that Francis addressed to the Sisters of San Damiano: “*Audite, poverelle dal Signore vocate / ke de multe parte e provincie sete adunate.*” (“Hear, poor women called by the Lord / who have gathered together from many parts and provinces.”)

We have been called by the Lord to live an evangelical Form of Life which finds one of its principal sources in the *Regula bullata*. As the Minister General wrote to us in the letter for the Solemnity of St. Clare: “The Rules of Francis and Clare have a common charismatic root, which refers to the initial «*forma vitæ*» given by Francis to Clare and her first companions sometime after landing at San Damiano.” Indeed, those who had the opportunity to follow the celebration in the Basilica of St. John Lateran this past November 29th were able to experience this gift of unity which makes us feel personally challenged by the ‘return’ of the *Rule* made by the Pope to the Order of Minors, stimulating us to ‘grow more and more in goodness.’

Called by the Lord, we found ourselves together forming communities with Sisters who, most of the time, we did not know before. We often repeat that “we did not choose ourselves,” but “we were chosen.”

Thus, in these pages, some Sisters tell the events that made them multicultural communities in Brazil, Italy, and Great Britain. From Uganda, however, a recent experience of ‘updating’ *Words with melody* comes to us.



All this has an authoritative and precious introduction in two parts: the letter of Br. Fábio Gomes, ofm, who invites us to stop and reflect on the two expressions of Francis: *Dal Signore vocate* (“Called by the Lord”) and *Da molte parti e province* (“From many parts and provinces”), and the second and final part of the study on *Words with melody* by Br. Carlo Paolazzi ofm.

We sincerely thank the Sisters and Brothers who made the publication of this new issue possible.

Special thanks to the Sisters of the Monastery of Novaglie, Italy, who sent images of the miniatures of the Codex with the *Words with melody*.

We invite everyone to send us stories and reflections for the next issue, no. 63, which will be published in June 2024. We remind you of the theme: *Vivate sempre en veritate / ke en obediencia moriate*. (“Live always in truth / that you may die in obedience.”) It is the next verse of the *Words with melody*, which calls us to reflect on obedience to the Lord, mediated by the mother, by the community, by history..., and on living in the truth. We gratefully await your stories!

To each and every one of you, happy reading!

The editorial team

We invite the Federations celebrating their Elective Assemblies to send us the names of the elected Sisters and their Monasteries, so that we can publish them in our magazine and in *Acta Ordinis*. Thank you!



Miniature of the *Audite Poverelle* (from the Monastery of Novaglie Codex)

Office Pro Monialibus

Letter of the General Delegate

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

May the Lord give you his peace!

As announced, in this issue we will reflect on the first part of the first verse of those words, with melody, written by Saint Francis to the Poor Ladies of the Monastery of San Damiano, *Audite, Poverelle*, which reads like this:

*Audite, Poverelle, dal Signor vocate,
ke de multe parte et provincie sete adunate.*

[Listen, poor little ones, called by the Lord,

Who have come together from many parts and provinces.]

I would like to highlight two expressions from this verse that I propose for our reflection: "called by the Lord" and "from many parts and provinces". Let us begin with the first one:

“Called by the Lord”

With this expression, I think that Francis is saying, first of all, that Clare and her Sisters are gathered in San Damiano not on their own initiative, nor out of social imposition or personal whim, nor even out of blood relationship, but because each of them heard with the ear of the heart (*Audite*) and accepted with complete availability (*Poverelle*) the greatest of all the benefits received from the Father of mercy (TestCl 2), that is, the holy vocation, the call to "follow the life and poverty of our most high Lord Jesus Christ and of his most holy Mother (FLCl 6.7)," to "observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, by living in obedience, without anything of one's own and in chastity (FLCl 1.2)."



As our Minister General, Br. Massimo Fusarelli, reminded us in his letter on the occasion of the solemnity of Saint Clare this year, we find ourselves here at “the heart of that ‘divine inspiration’ that leads those called to ‘embrace this life’ rather than a series of precepts and behaviors. The Gospel is the rule that sets both Francis and Clare on the path, giving a new shape to their whole life, thanks to ‘having the Spirit of the Lord and his holy activity’. It is He who animates an ever-new journey, which holds together the Gospel and life, the Rule and daily choices, large and small.”¹

“Called by the Lord”

It is, therefore, by divine inspiration (FLCI 2.1), that is, by the call of the Lord God through the Spirit, that Clare and her Sisters overcome all obstacles to live the same lifestyle together: life according to the form of the Holy Gospel, the “form of life and the manner of holy unity and of the highest poverty (FLCI, Intro., 2).” And it was this same divine inspiration that moved many “poor little ones (*poverelle*)” who, in these more than 800 years of history, listened and responded generously to the Lord’s call.

Thus we can say that in the Lord's call to Clare and, why not say it, in that prophecy of Francis while he was restoring the little church of San Damiano and which came true in Clare and her first companions (see TestCI 13-14; 2Cel 13 ; 2Cel 204; L3C 24), all the Sisters, present and future, were already there (BICI 5), because it was Clare’s yes that made and continues to make possible every Sister’s yes in these more than 800 years.

And here we are almost naturally led to the second expression on which we want to meditate:

“From many parts and provinces”

Indeed, from the beginning the community of San Damiano welcomed women, noble or common, literate or illit-



erate, not only from Assisi but also from different provinces (as can be seen from the names of the witnesses at Clare's canonization process, for example: Benvenuta of Perugia, Francesca the daughter of Sir Capitaneo of Col de Mezzo, Lucia of Rome, etc.) and Sisters from very different cultures referred themselves to them, as is evidenced by Clare's correspondence with Agnes of Prague and Ermentrudes of Bruges. In fact, in a short time the life of San Damiano spread throughout the European continent and then to all the other continents, so much so that we can say that Clare's form of life is present today at almost all latitudes of the earth.

How beautiful it is for me to recognize, on the occasion of the meetings and visits that the Lord gives me the grace to make, Clare's own face in so many different cultural traits!

“From many parts and provinces”

This was also very evident in the responses to the two questionnaires sent to your communities during the first two phases of the revision process of your *General Constitutions*. In fact, the Order of the Poor Sisters of Saint Clare is becoming ever more multicultural and international, since within the same community or federation there are Sisters from different regions of the same nation and from different nations, of different ethnic and cultural origins, and of different social backgrounds.

First of all, this reality represents a great grace, because it offers everyone new possibilities to embody the same charism, which, having its origins in the Gospel, is so great and profound that it cannot be contained and expressed by a single cultural sensibility. This same reality, however, represents a great challenge.

We are called, on the one hand, to a profound mutual acceptance and integration of our differences, overcoming prejudices that sometimes unconsciously condition us, and,



on the other hand, to a profound discernment, seeking to verify, each time, to what extent certain cultural traits are in harmony with the Gospel and, consequently, with the essence of the charism.

This is why I believe that this time, too, as we did in the last issue with the words *Audite* and *Poverelle*, we must keep the two expressions together:

**“Called by the Lord”
and “from many parts and provinces”**

Indeed, as the Minister General also recalled in his letter, “Today we are asked to ‘hold together’ the essentials of the charism, which all unite, along with the differences,” because “a unity that flattens is unrealistic, just as diversity at all costs, deliberately lacking a shared core, is harmful.”²

It is, therefore, a question of living, starting from all cultures and beyond them, the new life that comes from the Gospel, aware that, in a spiritual sense, before coming from a specific nation and a specific culture, as Christians we are all born from Christ's *Pasch* and, like Clare, each Sister is born from Clare's yes to the Lord's call.

It seems to me that precisely from this depth we will be able to live, ever more and better, in that “holy unity” that is born “from mutual love and peace (FLCI 4.22)” and thus, in this world torn apart by so many wars, including the one in Holy Land that is unfolding as I write these lines, we can be a sign of hope for many who have already lost it.

May God bless you.

*Br. Fábio Cesar Gomes, ofm
General Delegate Pro Monialibus*

¹ CA:ED I, 394.

² <https://www.ofm.org/en/minister-general-s-letter-for-the-solemnity-of-st-clare-2023.html>. Citations in the text from LR 10.8; FLCI 10.9.

³ Idem

Audite Poverelle



Francis delivers the Rule to Clare (*Miniature from the Monastery of Novaglie Codex*)



The Exhortation «Audite Poverelle, dal Signore vocate»

Fr. Carlo Paolazzi, ofm

(continued from [no. 61](#))

At the end of these first round of thoughts, which mark the essential moments in the entire spiritual journey of the daughters and handmaids of the Supreme King, Francis goes on to admonish that a life of poverty, charity and obedience to the Father's will is not born of the counsels of human prudence, but rather from the inner voice of the Spirit:

Do not look at the life outside,
for that of the Spirit is better (vv. 5-6).

On a first reading it may seem that Francis with the expression "the life outside" intends to refer to the secular life which he himself left after his conversion⁵³ and contrast it with the "interior" life of the cloistered world, defined almost par excellence as the "life of the spirit". The exhortation might therefore indicate in the fraternity of San Damiano «psychological situations, trials, unexpected sufferings that could lead one to look with nostalgia at life outside the monastery»⁵⁴, with the risk of incurring the serious evangelical warning that Francis quotes in the Rule for his Brothers: «no one who puts his hand to the plough and then turns back is fit for the kingdom of God»⁵⁵.

To totally exclude from Francis' words some veiled allusion in this direction would perhaps be excessive, given the heartfelt tone with which he elsewhere reminds himself and his Brothers that «since we have abandoned the world, we have nothing else to do but follow the will of the Lord and please Him alone»⁵⁶. However, the profound core of the invitation to the «poor ladies» is certainly not this. First of all, it is unthinkable that Francis, in the same days in which he



had imagined sending his Brothers around the world to open hearts to spiritual joy by crying out to all «Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks, and serve Him with great humility»⁵⁷, contrasts so harshly and bluntly the cloistered life «of the spirit» (probably to be written «of the Spirit») with the life «outside» of the secular faithful, to whom in his Letter addressed to them he reserves the highest and most moving description of the Christian life as a Trinitarian indwelling that has ever come forth from his heart and pen⁵⁸.

Moreover, it has been rightly noted that, in the *Exhortation*, the life «outside» is not contrasted with the life «inside» of the monastery, but the interior openness to the Spirit of God⁵⁹, and therefore for internal coherence of the levels of meaning «the life outside», he will in some way allude to the search (worldly and pseudo-religious) for forms of exteriority, which are opposed to the «interior holiness of the Spirit», as explained in a dense page of the first Rule for Friars Minor: «Let us guard against the wisdom of this world and the prudence of the flesh. The spirit of the flesh, in fact, wants and is very concerned with possessing words, but little with putting them into practice, and does not seek the religion and *interior holiness of the spirit*, but wants and desires to have a religion and a *holiness outwardly apparent [foris apparentem]* to people... The spirit of the Lord, on the other hand, desires the flesh to be mortified and despised, considered of little worth and rejected. It strives for humility and patience and the pure and simple and true peace of the Spirit. Above all, it always desires the divine fear and the divine wisdom and the divine love of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit»⁶⁰.

Against the backdrop of this juxtaposition, the conclusion that the life of the spirit «is better» appears entirely unexceptionable. The phrase implies echoes of the wisdom writings («wisdom is better than all things precious», Prov 8:11) and perhaps even an echo of the Gospel passage in which, faced with Martha's busyness in her many services, Jesus



affirms that the contemplative Mary «has chosen the better part, which shall not be taken away from her» (Lk 10:42). The contrast is not between good and evil, but between good and better. To say to a community of cloistered nuns, gathered like Martha and Mary around Jesus, that the life of the spirit «is better», means being invited to the search for the essential against the inessential, to reaffirm the primacy of being and interior living against "doing", even if animated by the best intentions, to proclaim the excellence of the Spirit that speaks and lives in the heart over forms of religious behaviour that rely on exterior observances.

Because Francis knows very well that the search for exteriority (*the life outside*) can insinuate itself in a subtle manner, even in the daily experience of the religious, he repeatedly insists that his brothers beware of it, when he writes in the *Letter to the entire Order*: «I beg, as I can,... that the clerics say the Office with devotion, before God, not worrying about the melody of the voice, but about the harmony of the mind, so that the voice may be in harmony with the mind, the mind be in harmony with God. Let them do this that they may be able to please God by their purity of heart, rather than charm the ears of people by the sweetness of their voice»⁶¹. For the «poor ladies» gathered in the atmosphere of prayer and hiddenness in San Damiano, the occasions or temptations to flaunt religiosity are certainly fewer than those of the brothers occupied in the apostolate, but the snare can take the most subtle and deceptive forms, penetrating even into the heart of a life according to the holy Gospel:

I beseech you out of great love

To use with discretion the alms the Lord gives you (vv. 7-8).

Modern day readers are rather divided and uncertain as to what the profound meaning of the exhortation entrusted by Francis to these two verses, meanwhile, they agree in reading them as completely separate from the two preceding verses, to which instead they would seem to be closely connected by the presence of the rhyme, according to a



constant rule in the *Canticle* and also used in the other verses of our text. The fundamental question revolves around the meaning to be attributed to the expression «to use with discretion»: is it an invitation to a merciful use of alms or, on the contrary, a call to the rigour of poverty?

The only other place in Francis' writings where «discretion» is related to the exercise of poverty, does not entirely resolve the dilemma: «Where there is *mercy and discretion*, there is neither superfluity nor harshness»⁶². It seems to be understood that, if it is «mercy» that defeats «harshness», it is up to «discretion» to eliminate «superfluity», but Francis here and in the rest of the admonition insists on presenting pairs of virtues that proceed together and complement each other, and therefore it is "merciful discretion", not a single one of the twin virtues, that dissolves simultaneously the shadows of excess and of defect in the use of the goods bestowed by the Lord.

In our case, then, the problem will be to know to which of the two opposing risks of «superfluity» and «harshness» Clare and her «poor ladies» were exposed: and here a useful glimmer is opened up by the information provided by the legislative and biographical texts. At San Damiano, fasting is the habitual condition of a nuptial fraternity that lives in the absence of the Bridegroom⁶³ and waits vigilantly for his return, as the *Rule* imposes: «The Sisters are to fast at all times»⁶⁴. In one of her letters to Agnes of Prague, who had asked for advice on the matter, Clare minutely explains the forms and limits of this continued fast, which allowed only one meal a day: «In your prudence you certainly know that, except for the weak and infirm - for whom [Francis] counselled and commanded us to use all discretion [*omnem discretionem*] in matters of food -, none of us who are healthy and strong should eat anything other than Lenten fare, both on ferial and feast days, thus fasting every day except Sundays and the Nativity of the Lord, on which days we may have two meals. On the Thursdays of ordinary time, each one may choose, so that she who clearly does not want to,



is not obliged to fast. However, we who are healthy fast every day except Sundays and Christmas». But the most enlightening information for us is that Francis, already fraternally solicitous of an enlightened *discretion* (note the term!) towards the weak and sick, had regulated the whole matter with a special writing of his own, which tended to further temper the ascetic rigours of the «poor ladies»: «We are not, however, obliged to fast - as Blessed Francis taught us in one of his writings - during the whole of Easter and on the feasts of Our Lady and the Holy Apostles, unless these feasts fall on a Friday».⁶⁵

And that is not all. With Clare, who had embarked on forms of bodily mortification that perhaps, as her biographer observes, «rather than talk about it, it would be better to pass over in silence»⁶⁶, Francis had to intervene with authority to limit the excesses of abstinence from food, because to the ardour of the fragile and strong woman the fasting practised by common rule at San Damiano did not seem sufficient: «And admire, O reader, what you could not imitate: for three days each week, that is, Monday, Wednesday and Friday, during those Lents [= Advent and Major Lent], she abstained completely from any food. Thus, one after the other, days of poor nourishment alternated successively with days of complete abstinence: almost as if the eve of a perfect fast was relaxed into a festive day of bread and water. It is no wonder that such rigour, maintained over a long period of time, predisposed Clare to illness, consumed her strength, and weakened her physically. Therefore, the daughters, very devoted to their holy mother, suffered for her and lamented with tears those daily deaths to which she voluntarily subjected herself. Finally, blessed Francis and the bishop of Assisi forbade Saint Clare the exhausting three-day fast, ordering her not to let any day pass without eating at least an ounce and a half of bread»⁶⁷.

On this way of interpreting and living the folly of love and the following of Christ, between Francis and the daughters and handmaids of the King dwelling at San Damiano, a clo-



se dialogue had therefore been going on for some time, where Clare felt called to burn and consume herself like wax and Francis reminded her and her Sisters of the duties of a merciful discretion: a recurring theme, as we have seen, in his exhortations to moderate the ascetic rigour of fasting, and which the saint could therefore apply generically to the problem of almsgiving in the certainty of being understood. And in fact, the well-informed author of the news in the *Perugian Legend*, which we have taken as our guide, places the *Exhortation* in the context of Francis' paternal and fraternal solicitude for the «poor ladies», illustrating without hesitation the point that interests us in full harmony with the parallel sources we have just cited: «Therefore, Francis knowing that the Sisters had from the beginning led a harsh and poor life, and were still leading it, either by their own will or by necessity, his mind turned with sentiments of pity and love towards them. Therefore, in that hymn... he especially recommended that, using the alms the Lord sent them, they should discreetly [*discrete*] provide for their bodies with joy and thanksgiving...»⁶⁸.

In this same sense, the invitation to "discretion" must have been understood and meditated upon by Clare, if in the letter already quoted to Agnes of Prague she concluded thus: «But our flesh is not bronze, nor is our strength the strength of stone. On the contrary we are fragile and prone to every bodily weakness. I beg you, therefore, dearly beloved, to refrain wisely and prudently from an indiscreet and impossible austerity in the fasting that you have undertaken. And I beg you in the Lord to praise the Lord by your very life, to offer to the Lord your reasonable service, and your sacrifice always seasoned with salt»⁶⁹. In the Testament, Clare's recommendations to «the one who will have the office of abbess» reveal an implicit quotation and an obvious echo of *Audite, poverelle*: «Let her also be prudent and discreet towards her Sisters, like a good mother towards her daughters, and especially see to it that she provides for them according to the needs of each one, with the alms that



the Lord will give (*de eleemosynis quas Dominus dabit*)»⁷⁰.

The area of significance in which to place the term discretion had therefore been clearly grasped by Fr. Boccali, who already in the first presentation of the text emphasised that «when Francis recommends discretion in the use of alms, he must be recommending something that corresponds to his spirituality and to the practical situation of the Sisters: he therefore recommends to understand who the great Almsgiver is, to understand that almsgiving is the inheritance left by Christ to his disciples, to understand that one is eating at the table of the Lord. Eat, therefore, with a grateful heart, with joy, with a blessing heart, with a contented heart (even and above all in the face of morsels of bread and the limitedness of such gifts), avoiding excessive austerity»⁷¹. It is above all this last piece of advice that Francis declares to give «out of great love», a clear sign that it concerns something that is particularly close to his heart. The singular strength of the expression is reaffirmed indirectly by the fact that, while the term *charitas* in the writings of the saint is widely applied both to God and to the fraternity, this is perhaps the only case in which Francis uses love with a positive meaning in reference to others other than God⁷². One is led to think that the term *love*, so implicated with purely human components, not to mention compromised in ambiguous uses and meanings within that courtly literature that Francis knew well, in the relationship with Clare and the "ladies" of San Damiano, could regain all its original purity and transparency, as a synonym for "charity". The prayer «for great love» thus allows a secret vibration of tenderness to surface within the sober and austere intonation of the *Exhortation*, so different from the lofty and flexible one of the *Canticle of Brother Sun*⁷³.

At this point, we have some elements to resolve the problem of the connection between the considerations in vv. 5-6 (superiority of the life of the spirit over the life «outside») and those in vv. 7-8 (the "discreet" use of alms), which to more than one reader seemed distant, even if



«not... totally unrelated: it is the superiority of the life of the spirit that demands discretion in the use of what "the Lord gives you"»⁷⁴. But if the commentary notes provided in the preceding pages are persuasive, perhaps one can go further. After affirming in general the superiority of the life «of the spirit» over the life «outside», Francis immediately applies the principle to the situation well known to him of the penitents of San Damiano, and recalling their gratitude to the heavenly "great Almsgiver", he implicitly suggests that austerity, physical penances and in particular fasting, when these go beyond the bounds of discretion can turn into a subtle inner deception, into the pursuit of «a religion and holiness that appears outside to people», or resolve themselves into the illusory gratification of the conscience of those who "appropriate" their own good works. All this could lead to the tarnishing of that poverty of spirit that demands above all detachment from the idolatry of the self, as Francis reiterates in one of his admonitions: «Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Mt 5:3). There are many who, applying themselves insistently to prayers and good deeds, engage in much abstinence and bodily mortification, but they are immediately offended and disturbed by a single word which seems an insult to their person, or by some other things which might be taken away from them, scandalised, they quickly become irritated. These people are not poor in spirit, for the one who is truly poor in spirit hates himself and loves those who strike him on the cheek»⁷⁵.

On the possible negative implications of Francis' call to temper the austerity of the fasts, one must naturally be very cautious. For Clare "the Christian", for example, the concern must have been about the physical risks of excessive abstinence, certainly not those of an interior deviance, if it is reasonable to think that Francis knew closely and by direct experience what the saint's biographer would later record: «And while it is usually the case that harsh physical mortification produces depression of spirit as a consequence,



quite different was the effect that shone through in Clare: in all her mortifications, she in fact maintained a joyful and serene aspect, so that she seemed to make light of or even to feel the anxieties of the body.

From this we can clearly see that she overflowed outwardly with the holy joy with which her inner self abounded: because the love of the heart removes all harshness from the scourges of the body»⁷⁶.

The verse from Admonition XXVII was commented on earlier: «Where there is mercy and discretion, there is neither superfluity nor hardness». The «discretion» recommended by Francis to the «poor ladies» certainly excludes any «superfluity» that might offend lady poverty, but it also welcomes that «mercy» that tempers and softens any «hardness», opening the heart to enjoy the gifts that the Lord bestows on his daughters and maidservants. From all the episodes and texts cited, it is thus clear that the virtues become "Sisters" and are complementary not only in the same person, but also in different persons inhabited by the same Spirit: and so Clare, the contemplative, advises Francis to devote himself to the apostolic life⁷⁷, while Francis, the great penitent, exhorts Clare and the Sisters «out of great love» to provide for their needs with discretion and gratitude. Aware, as will soon become apparent that he is speaking to the infirm and to the Sisters who care for them, he puts into action with the «ladies» of San Damiano that line of behaviour that Celano had summarised as «severe with himself, lenient with others»⁷⁸.

In spite of his personal ascetic rigour, Francis could not forget that the Gospel command is: «You shall love your neighbour as yourself»⁷⁹, and that well-ordered love towards oneself is a balancing force ready to be transformed into solicitude towards one's Brothers and Sisters. For the supreme truth of the Christian is love, and living «in truth», that is, in the merciful light of Christ and his Spirit, will mean taking care of one's own body and bearing «in peace» its



infirmities, but also and above all tiring oneself out in serving and supporting one's infirm Sisters:

Those who are weighed down by sickness
and the others who are wearied because of them,
all of you, bear it in peace

For you will sell this fatigue at a very high price,
and each one of you will be crowned queen
in heaven with the Virgin Mary (vv. 9-14).

The subdivision of these last verses into two nuclei of meaning is evident, because they are marked by assonances, but equally evident is their internal connection, whereby the daily toil of the disciples who follow their Lord on the way of the cross and carry one another's burdens⁸⁰ opens up to the Paschal hope of future glory and coronation. Without losing sight of the unity of the whole, however, it will be useful to illustrate each of the two short "verses" below.

Here too, ancient documents illuminate the historical and environmental context presupposed by Francis' words. The fraternity of San Damiano was largely visited by sickness, as is undoubtedly shown by the *Acts* of the process of canonisation: even before Francis' death, Clare was struck down by the infirmity that was to bring her «twenty-eight years of continuous exhaustion»⁸¹, while several of the witnesses recall the illnesses from which they or other Sisters were freed by Clare's prayers⁸². Francis could therefore share with the little flock of San Damiano not only the glory of the Lord's cross, but also the thoughts of consolation that had been given to him, gravely ill and infirm, on that night of suffering and grace in which the *Canticle of Brother Sun* was born. According to the ancient source already quoted at the beginning, it is precisely the mutual "compassion" that is at the origin of the "holy words with melody" that Francis composed «for the greater consolation of the poor ladies of San Damiano, precisely because he knew that they were very distressed by his infirmity»⁸³.



In the group of verses that conclude the *Exhortation*, therefore, themes and words already present in the Canticum resonate, where Francis praises the Lord for those who «endure infirmity and tribulation» and proclaims, «Blessed are those who *endure in peace*, / for by you, Most High, they shall be *crowned*». It was not only the nocturnal promise of the Kingdom that instilled feelings of peace in Francis, but also a word that came from further afield, because the power to "endure in peace" one's own and others' sufferings belongs to the peacemakers of the Gospel beatitude, described in Admonition XV by Francis himself: «Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God (Mt 5:9). True peacemakers are those who, in all the hardships they endure in this world, for the love of our Lord Jesus Christ keep peace of soul and body». It is enough to read the famous fioretto of «perfect joy» to understand the extent to which Francis and the first Franciscan generation had understood and made their own the Pauline lesson of the "glory of the cross"⁸⁴, within which every suffering of body and spirit can be transformed into an experience of peace: naturally, the peace that is born of love, not resignation.

The *Exhortation* to the «poor ladies», however, contains a novelty with respect to the Canticum, because the invitation to the serene and peaceful acceptance of the trial does not only concern the infirm, but also the Sisters "who are weary for their sake" in service and daily assistance. If it is true that every believer can only communicate the religious values, he or she has made his or her own, once again Francis shares with Clare and the Sisters the sorrowful and joyful thoughts he had expressed to his companions during a sleepless night:

«Dearly beloved Brothers and sons of mine, do not be troubled and sorrowful in assisting me in this illness. The Lord will render you in this world and in the next the fruit of your labours for me, his servant. He will also repay you for what you have to give up to care for me.... You will say to



me: 'We will make expenses for you, but in your place God will be our debtor!')»⁸⁵ The personal experience of suffering educates Francis to defend with jealous love the treasure of his own cross, but at the same time he opens his fraternal attention to those who suffer beside him.

Therefore, as always, Francis recommended to his Brothers and to the «poor ladies» what constituted one of the central aspects of his life as a "lesser brother", because the shared attention to the pain and destitution of others runs through his entire experience as a disciple of the Lord Jesus, «who went about doing good and healing all» (Acts 10:38). In fact, it is he himself, in the *Testament*, who points out that the true "conversion" of the totality of his person to evangelical love occurred in the encounter with the lepers, when «the Lord himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body»⁸⁶. From that moment, recalls Saint Bonaventure, he «stooped, with marvellous tenderness and compassion, towards anyone afflicted by some physical suffering and when he noticed deprivation or need in anyone, in the sweet pity of his heart, he considered it as a suffering of Christ himself»⁸⁷. Animated by these sentiments, in the Rule for his Brothers he orders that «if one of them falls ill, the other Brothers must serve him as they would wish to be served themselves»⁸⁸, a disposition that the «little plant» Clare, certainly not unaware of the *Exhortation* we are speaking of, will translate into a true community approach of assistance to the sick, according to the «bond of holy unity»: «With regard to the sick Sisters, the abbess helped by the other Sisters is firmly obliged to inform herself promptly of what their infirmity requires, both with regard to advice and with regard to food and other necessities, and to provide for them with charity and mercy, according to the possibilities of the place. For they are all bound to provide and serve their sick Sisters, as they would wish to be served themselves if they were suffering from any infirmity»⁸⁹.



Despite the deep wounds inflicted in his body by the illnesses and the stigmata of Christ, Francis never closed in on himself in a stoic and indifferent endurance of his ills, but always remained open to the suffering of others and to the demands of solidarity, so as to proclaim equally blessed those who suffer "infirmity and tribulation" in their own flesh and those who toil in supporting the weakness and suffering of their Brothers and Sisters. Indeed, even in his last days, the humble and indefatigable knight of evangelical love dreamt of being able to draw new strength to put himself and his life at the service of the least, as St. Bonaventure recalls: «Francis, by now confined in flesh and spirit with Christ on the cross, not only burned with seraphic love towards God, but felt the very thirst for Christ crucified for the salvation of people... He said to the Brothers: 'Let us begin, Brothers, to serve the Lord our God, for up until now we have done little or nothing. He was also burning with a great desire to return to that humility of his beginnings, to serve, as in the beginning, the lepers and to call back to primitive fervour the body now worn out by fatigue... In fact, there is no place for infirmity nor for laziness, where the impetus of love presses on to ever greater undertakings»⁹⁰.

Francis was therefore by now a man placed on that dividing line between time and eternity, between the historical urgency of the Kingdom and the expectation of its future fulfilment, which is admirably described in the last page of Revelation: «Let the righteous persevere in righteousness, and the holy continue to be holy. Behold, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work» (22:11-12). The hope, indeed the certainty of the prize had been given to him by the very sweet words he had heard during the night of assurance: «Brother, tell me: if one, in recompense for your illnesses and sufferings gave you a great and precious treasure..., would you not be very happy?»⁹¹. It is this consoling promise that Francis wants to share with the «poor ladies», whom he addresses by effectively mixing, according to the best biblical tradition, realistic expressions and high tones, the language of the parables of



the Kingdom with the Pauline language of the good soldier and the athlete who await the crown due to their labours:

For you will sell this fatigue at a very high price,
and each one of you will be crowned queen
in heaven with the Virgin Mary (vv. 12-14).

The verb 'to sell' is firmly evangelical, recalling among others the parables of the treasure hidden in the field (Mt 13:44) and of the precious pearl, for which the merchant goes and sells all his possessions (Mt 13:45-46). Francis, however, was the son of a merchant, and just as, after his conversion, he would transfer the chivalrous language of his youthful aspirations into a religious mode, so he would never erase the taste for popular speech - and perhaps the joke - assimilated in his youth. Exemplary in this regard is the episode narrated by the well-informed *Legend of the Three Companions*, which recounts that in the early days of his conversion, «one winter morning, while he was praying wearing miserable garments, his carnal brother passing by him, remarked ironically to a fellow citizen: "Tell Francis to sell you at least a penny of his sweat! The man of God, hearing the mocking words, was seized with superhuman joy and replied in French: 'I will sell this sweat, and very dearly, to my Lord'»⁹². Later on, the connection between suffering-fraternal help-future reward would become one of the constants of Francis' spirituality, who in the first Rule, after recommending the care of the sick, continues as follows: «And I beg the sick Brother to give thanks to the Creator for everything; and whatever the Lord wills for him, he should desire to be that, whether sick or healthy, since all those whom God has predestined for eternal life he instructs by means of the scourges and infirmities»⁹³. Clare and her Sisters too can therefore rejoice in their daily toil, remembering that «people lose all the things they leave behind in this world, but bring with them the reward of charity»⁹⁴ humble and disinterested, which does not look to reciprocity but to the expectation and need of those who suffer, as Francis observes in one of his thoughtful admoni-



tions: «Blessed is the servant who is as willing to love his Brother as much when he is infirm, and cannot return his service, as he would when he is well and can repay him»⁹⁵. Only the God of charity and love will be the worthy reward of love.

As Francis' exhortation draws to a close, great thoughts return and with them the beloved analogies between the Queen of Heaven and the humble handmaids of the great King gathered in the small court of San Damiano. In the antiphon that punctuates his liturgical *Office*, Francis had sung: «Holy Virgin Mary, there is no one like you, born in the world among women, daughter and handmaid of the most high and supreme King, the heavenly Father, mother of our most holy Lord Jesus Christ, spouse of the Holy Spirit»⁹⁶. Certainly, no one in the world is comparable to Mary in terms of the highest dignity of the mission and the depth of her capacity to welcome the Trinitarian mystery. But Francis knows that the gift of grace fulfilled in Mary is renewed daily in the Church and is reflected in particular in the person and life of the «poor ladies» gathered in San Damiano, to whom he wrote already in the early days of their vocation that "by divine inspiration you have become daughters and handmaids of the most high and supreme King, the heavenly Father, and you have married the Holy Spirit..."⁹⁷.

Now, however, his gaze goes beyond the journey, the toil, the brief earthly days, to dream of the moment when the Lord will realise in each one of his servants the great promise: «Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life» (Rev 2:10). Placed in the same serene and confident expectation of the last events, Clare, on the eve of her death, will speak to her soul as follows: «Go in peace, for you will have a good escort: for he who created you has made you holy, and put the Holy Spirit in you, and has always protected you as a mother her child; he has loved you with a tender love»⁹⁸. As pilgrims and strangers in this world in the joyful expectation of the future one, Francis and Clare do not look at death as a fracture and detachment, but as a



"Sister" who finally opens the door to the one and triune God, who in the mystery of Grace has already taken possession of the soul: "for it is now clear that the soul of the faithful person, who is the most worthy of all creatures, is made greater than heaven by the grace of God. For whereas the heavens with all other creatures cannot contain the Creator, the faithful soul, on the other hand, and it alone, is His dwelling-place and abode, and this only by reason of charity, of which the ungodly are devoid. It is Truth itself that affirms this: 'Anyone who loves me will be loved by my Father, and we shall love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.'"⁹⁹ And when the hidden God, the prize and crown of the saints, is finally revealed, from the confines of the greatest soul in heaven, the eye will run with love and inexhaustible wonder within the horizons of Him, who to Francis, a pilgrim in this world, already revealed Himself as light and charity «without beginning and without end, unchangeable, invisible, unspeakable, ineffable, incomprehensible, unfathomed, blessed, worthy of praise, glorious, exalted, sublime, lofty, sweet, lovable, delightful and all things desirable for ever and ever»¹⁰⁰.

⁵³ Cfr. 2Test 3 («exivi de sæculo», «left the world»).

⁵⁴ BOCCALI, *Canto di esortazione*, 24.

⁵⁵ Lc 9,62: e cfr. Rb II,13 (refer to this step SCHMUCKI, "*Audite, poverelle*", 140).

⁵⁶ Rnb XXII,9.

⁵⁷ Cfr. LegPer 43.

⁵⁸ Cfr. 2Lf IX,48-60.

⁵⁹ SCHMUCKI, "*Audite, poverelle*", 140.

⁶⁰ Rnb XVII,10-16. It is to be mitigated in the sense clarified above, the observation that in the first Rule the contrast is «to an entirely different purpose». (MENICETTI, *Riflessioni complementari*, 585).

⁶¹ LOrd 40-42.



⁶² Am XXVII,6. No help comes from the second parallel place (the body of the Lord is to be «administered to others with discretion», First Letter to the Guardians [= 1LCust] 4).

⁶³ Cfr. Mt 9,14-15; Mc 2,18-20; Lc 5,32-35.

⁶⁴ RsC III,8.

⁶⁵ 3LAg 31-36. The entire page is inspired by the "merciful discretion" of which he speaks in Adm XXVII.

⁶⁶ LegsC 17.

⁶⁷ LegsC 18.

⁶⁸ LegPer 45.

⁶⁹ 3LAg 38-41.

⁷⁰ TestsC 63-64. The phrase *de eleemosynis quas Dominus dabit* is a translation of the verse *de le lemosene ke ve dà el Signore* [the alms the Lord gives you] (the correlation is mentioned in CHIARA, *Scritti*, 186, nota).

⁷¹ BOCCALI, *Parole di esortazione*, 65. If here and in the *Perugian Legend* some echo may perhaps appear questionable, it will be necessary to temper the observation that «*aiate discrezione* [use with discretion] is almost ruthless: it concedes nothing, it is a harsh reminder of the obligation to "live sine proprio"» (MENICHETTI, *Riflessioni complementari*, 593).

⁷² An exception, in the *Letter to the whole Order*, is the expression «out of fear or love for any man» (II,14), where, however, the meaning is clearly negative; and further on, the recommendation is that in "places" where there are several priests, «one should out of love be content to listen to the celebration of the other priest» (III,30), where the specification is corrective to the basic term.

⁷³ Cfr. MENICHETTI, *Riflessioni complementari*, 582-584.

⁷⁴ MENICHETTI, *Riflessioni complementari*, 581. He speaks more generally of the absence of "the entire discourse" BOCCALI, *Parole di esortazione*, 70; ID., *Canto di esortazione*, 29.

⁷⁵ Am XIV. On this theme, see other ideas in PAOLAZZI, *Lettura degli "Scritti"*, 123-128.

⁷⁶ LegsC 18.

⁷⁷ Cfr. LegM XII,1-2; Fior XVI.

⁷⁸ 1Cel 83.

⁷⁹ Mt 23,39 (and parallel texts). Francis, in fact, does not forget this, on the contrary he lingers on it thoughtfully: «And let us love our neighbours as ourselves. And if anyone does not want to love them as himself, at least let him do them no harm but good» (2Lf IV,26-27).

⁸⁰ Let us recall the Pauline exhortation: «Bear one another's burdens, so that you will fulfill the law of Christ» (Gal 6,2).

⁸¹ LegsC 39 (the first witness speaks of twenty-nine years, Proc I,17).

⁸² The data are condensed in BOCCALI, *Parole di esortazione*, 66-68.

⁸³ LegPer 45.



⁸⁴ Cfr. Fior VIII (but see also the more ancient and reliable writing, *Of true and perfect joy*).

⁸⁵ LegPer 47. The analogy between the two 'consolations' was noted by Fr Feliciano Olgiati, in a note to the quoted text.

⁸⁶ 2Test 2-3.

⁸⁷ LegM VII,5.

⁸⁸ Rb VI,9.

⁸⁹ RegsC 12-14. The bull of approval of the Rule of Clare speaks of «the style of the holy unity» (*modum sanctæ unitatis*). In what comes from Francis, and what is new in the writings of the Rule of Clare, the observations of Matura in *Introduzione a CHIARA, Scritti*, 35-76 are illuminating.

⁹⁰ LegM XIV,1.

⁹¹ LegPer 43. In hagiographic texts the word *certificatio* signifies the divine assurance granted to a saint regarding his personal salvation.

⁹² 3Comp 23. French, at that time a language of long and tested literary tradition, was used by the newly converted Francis on special occasions (such as the announcement of the arrival of «holy women» at San Damiano) and with an ennobling function.

⁹³ Rnb X,3.

⁹⁴ 2Lf V,31.

⁹⁵ Am XXIV.

⁹⁶ Uff I,1.

⁹⁷ Fv 1. The *form of life* dates back to 1212-1213. On the mystery of the Trinity in relation to Mary and the Church, see the essential account offered by VAN ASSELDONK, *Maria, sposa dello Spirito Santo*, 414-423.

⁹⁸ Proc III,20.

⁹⁹ 3LAg 21-23.

¹⁰⁰ Rnb XXIII,9.



Called by the Lord...

... to Mbarara, Uganda

Listen Little Ones, Resurfaced

Our generous, cherished editorial team of CTC have offered us a wonderful opportunity of Renewal in our Clarian calling which is a challenge too. They have suggested that St. Francis exhortation to St. Clare and her Sisters, be one of the topics for our communities reflection and study from 2023-2025 to mark the 8th Centenary of its composition.

Our Father St. Francis composed and put to a Melody this Canticle which is well known to us by its opening words: *Listen Little Poor Ones*.

Francis was then staying at the Monastery of San Damiano. Without any doubt Francis had come to know what was transpiring in the community of San Damiano. He was aware of their joys and challenges which are never lacking in any community. And so, his special solicitude for his daughters drove him to address this wonderful exhortation: *Listen Little Poor Ones*.

Listen, is a call for silence wherever there is noise or when any important message needs to be communicated. The opening word, “Listen”, suggests that an important message is to be delivered. So, St. Francis wrote this encouraging text to remind St. Clare and her Sisters of the





beauty of their vocation. And so this exhortation is held dear to us all Poor Clares, for we perceive in it the special solicitude and love of father for his daughters. Francis opened up his heart stressing what we know and believe to be the heart of the Clarian calling. We are poor Little Ones after the example of Our Poor Founder of Assisi. For he often liked to call himself: “il Poverello”.

Providentially on the 9th June 2023, the Poor Clare Sisters at the Monastery of the Holy Church in Mbarara Uganda witnessed the *Canticle* come back to life in the fatherly visit of our Minister General br. Massimo Fusarelli with his Brothers. Who were we to be considered worth of such a visitation!

With hearts full of gladness and thanksgiving to God, the giver of gifts, with song and dance, we called on Brother Sun, Sister Moon and all elements of Mother Earth to assist us in glorifying God for this precious moment as our Brothers were ushered into the cloister garden, where we met with our Brothers for nearly one hour, since they could not afford staying longer.

Needless to say, joys, greetings and exchange of news of the Order, was the spontaneous programme of the visit in a spirit of freedom. Last but not least came the gentle and kind exhortation from our Br. Massimo: “Sisters, times are challenging and you are working hard to make ends meet,





please try hard to keep a balance between prayer and work”.

This admonition was reminisced, and brought back to memory, the *Listen Little poor ones* of our father St. Francis.

800 years since the establishment of our Order, Poor Sisters are not lacking in challenge, trying to be authentic followers of the Clarian way of Gospel living. Thus, the invitation to Listen by St. Francis, St. Clare calls on us to Look, to Gaze and Jesus, invites us to love, remain in love, love of God and love neighbour.

“Listen”, “Look”, “Love”, are the three pillars on which our Clarian life is founded like a tripod stand each reinforcing the strength of the other.



May we like our Mother Mary learn the art of *listening* with the ears of the heart, *looking* with the eyes of our Lord, and *loving* with the deep sentiments of Jesus.

All for the love and glory of our Lord, who has considered us worth to live with Him.

Sr. Mary Elizabeth Tushabe, osc

Come together from many parts and provinces...

... to Arundel, Great Britain

In 1972, the community of Poor Clares in Arundel amalgamated with a community of enclosed 3rd Order Regular Franciscans, founded in the Low Countries in the 17th century, for exiled English women who felt called to a Franciscan way of life. When it became safer, in 1794, they returned to England and in 1972, in response to the recommendations of 'Perfectæ Caritatis' they asked to become Poor Clares, and sixteen Sisters were welcomed to Arundel where they proved to be an incalculable gift to that community.

Of the current community, nine Sisters have entered here and stayed, and twelve Sisters have transferred from other Poor Clare communities, either because those communities had closed or more usually because they felt they could no longer find life in the community where they had entered. As we shared, there was agreement that no one leaves her community lightly, it is a measure of desperation. Those twelve Sisters brought with them their formation and traditions from ten different communities. To add to the richness, these Sisters who either entered here or transferred here included three widows, and their origins were in Sri Lanka, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, France, Portugal, England, Ireland, Wales, and Scotland! So, we are a very great mixture!

Being such a diverse group has many challenges: our expectation, our formation, the 'culture' of our original community is part of us, and we have to try and avoid comparisons, but rather accept inevitable differences.

Some Sisters came with relief, others with a great sense of loss because they had loved the way of life in their communities, and even just to cross a land border in the United Kingdom can feel a great loss. Those who carried much pain have found some healing and in the process have drawn closer to God. Also, the passage of time and a bit if



hindsight has allowed some of us to realise we brought with us good things, even from communities we have chosen to leave, and hopefully we can live those values here in Arundel. We all have the continuity of our Poor Clare way of life and even the painful things are touched by resurrection.

There are so many positive aspects of living in this 'mixture'; we get to realise quickly that there is no one good way of doing things, and that change can be survived and even prove a blessing!

We are encouraged to be ourselves, to speak frankly and openly in Chapter. We experience differences and try not to let them become divisions. We learn that forgiveness and reconciliation are possible and bring us closer. We can all contribute to, and walk towards the oneness we all desire. We can reach a level of sharing that is at first a shock to Sisters who came from other communities, but they quickly appreciate it.

The difficulty of the limitations and advancing age and sickness is met with such kindness, that it leads to huge gratitude in those who benefit from this kindness. The community has learned to make space for differences in food, in where people can pray best, in what relaxes them, and in making sure as far as possible that all have some time each week 'just to be', and not to mention having a day's 'holiday' each month so Sisters can just 'chill out and have some space'.

We know we have a lot of work to do on this journey to the Kingdom, and we recognise that the great gift of the Community Chapter will help us to keep moving. It can take a lot of courage and energy to keep bringing things back to Chapter, differences surface, pain is exposed, but unfailingly honesty and generosity bring wisdom and healing.



It is the place where we can share from the heart what is most important to us, it keeps us talking to each other about this way of life which is precious to each one of us.

The Sisters of Arundel





... to Rome, Italy

“Listen, little poor ones,... gathered from many parts and provinces”

Certainly, when the holy Father St. Francis wrote in this way to Clare and the first Sisters gathered around her at San Damiano, they could not have imagined what these ‘parts and provinces’ would be capable of becoming. The prophetic spirit, which moved him, saw ‘beyond’ as always. Our community in the monastery of Santa Chiara of Rome, probably better known as ‘the monastery of via Vitellia’ is just such an example. For more than ten years now the community has been characterised by the presence of Sisters from various nationalities. Along with the Italian group, which is the largest, there have been Sisters from Nigeria, a German and even one from far-of Japan. The international character was nurtured above all by the frequent passage of Sisters from all Italy, indeed from all the world, seeking hospitality and called to Rome for a variety of needs. How could we not mention, to name the most significant example, welcoming Sisters from the International Commission, called here to work on the redaction of our General Constitutions, a Commission which is still in function? Living together for a period of two years, the Sisters entered the life and rhythm of the community, and this could not be otherwise because that is the style which has always marked ‘the monastery of via Vitellia’. Every Sister who arrives is fully one of us. That is how she is seen and that is how she is treated.

At this moment, there are Sisters here from Africa (Nigeria) from Asia (Vietnam and the Philippines) from Europe (Germany and Romania) and Italian Sisters coming in their turn from regions stretching from the north to the south of Italy. There is also, these days, a temporary reception of Sisters from every part of Italy and the world. This is a precious gift because it enables a continual meeting with



the many facets of our lived charism. And for us it is certainly a wonderful thing that every time we can recognise each other as Sisters, united by that invisible but indestructible root which is the charism of Clare!

An aspect which, for us Italians, is far from secondary is the way this variety of cultures interacts with our daily lives. There is also the chance to understand how our own culture can look to those who arrive from abroad... and in this way we discover that for them, the real strangeness of the situation is actually us!

What is interesting - and often very funny - is the meeting of practical aspects of our life together: the food, the way of living liturgically beyond the way of celebrating feasts, our relation with our families of origin, care of our health and our general way of looking after ourselves physically - these all become an area for exchanging experience, for a mutual enrichment and for a widening of mind and heart.

It is not only the practical aspects but also our values that are sometimes perceived and lived with different nuances, nuances maybe but we all know very well how - in our way of life - it is often essential to clarify those nuances at a deeper level, to give time to dialogue, to spend time also in prayer so that we can enter into the world of another Sister!

The diversity is anyway seen by everyone as a positive challenge and an invitation to growth. When we speak of diversity, we refer to a wide range of alternative possibilities which is not so much or not only the diversity of continents, but also that mystery which each one of us carries within herself, out of reach even to ourselves. This is how sincere and deep fraternal bonds can be formed between Sisters from different continents even while the world of the Sister who comes from your own home city may remain mysterious! If we remember, Francis was writing to Sisters who all came from within a radius of ten kilometres. The one who came the furthest - to judge from the witnesses at the Process of Canonisation - was Sr. Lucia from Rome.



Could it not also be that he was referring to those 'parts and provinces' which inhabit each one of us, and which can sometimes make the far of places near, and the near ones become afar of?

Our community in Rome, the eternal city, where different cultures have always crossed each other, where one breathes deeply from the universality of the Church, where there is the high challenge of welcoming those who comes from afar and who seek a home: here we are called, by the grace of God, and in this matter we are tested daily. We need patience and hope to be seeds of unity amid diversity, to enable a ray of light to shine beyond the walls of our monastery so that we do speak of communion, of sisterly love, of sincere charity. In this way we continue the precious work done by Francis and Clare - a work of courageous restoration of the house of God and in people's hearts.

The Sisters of Rome, Santa Chiara





... to Brixen, Italy

“From many parts and provinces...”

The title of this article is a quote from St. Francis' exhortation to St. Clare and her Sisters. Apparently the Sisters in San Damiano did not just come from the immediate surroundings of Assisi. Where the first Sisters came from in Brixen and exactly how the founding took place remains a mystery. Most likely the first Sisters came from the existing Poor Clares monastery in Trent.

Our monastery in Brixen was first mentioned in a document in 1235. It was a small beginning. Little by little the convent grew. The current form of monastery and church dates back to the second half of the 17th century. Under the direction of the Franciscan Provincial Father Rufin Laxner,



who was himself an architect, the Poor Clares monastery was expanded and partially rebuilt between 1663 and 1668.

Based on the model of San Damiano, a small Franciscan monastery was attached to the Church of the Poor Clares, which was structurally modified or rebuilt by 1683.

Today four Brothers from four nations live in this small hospice. It is documented very early on that there



were always Sisters who did not come from the immediate area of Brixen. For example, in 1321 Sr. Peterzina was elected abbess. She came from Rottenburg, Germany which is around 400 kilometers to the north.

For geographical and political reasons, the Sisters of our monastery always came from “different districts”. Around 1450, Sisters from Nuremberg/Germany reformed our monastery. To consolidate the reform, Sr. Barbara Freyding from the Poor Clare Monastery in Nuremberg was abbess for several years from 1455. Later, all the Nuremberg Sisters returned to their monastery of origin.

The Sisters didn't just come from “all over the world”. Some foundations went out from Brixen, or Sisters helped out elsewhere: for example in Freiburg im Breisgau in Germany, Rovereto in Italy, Meran in South Tyrol (Northern Italy) and Hall in Tirol in Austria. Many of these monasteries perished during the Reformation or were abolished by Emperor Joseph II.





Archduke Sigismund the Rich gave the order that the Poor Clares in Brixen were to immediately leave the city and the country. After some unloaded salt wagons were made available as carts, all 31 Sisters had to get up from the dinner they had prepared and also carry out five sick Sisters. On the night of October 25th to 26th, 1461, the Poor Clares left the city in eight salt wagons and headed north. After an extremely strenuous journey, the Sisters found shelter and accommodation in Pfullingen/Germany. The exile lasted three years. During this time, the Brixen Poor Clares reformed the Pfullingen community.

On November 18, 1464, eighteen Sisters returned to Brixen; eight Sisters had now died and five remained in Pfullingen, Germany, to support and consolidate the reform there.

Of the 181 terms of office of abbesses listed up to 2015, 47 sisters were elected to serve as abbess who did not come from the immediate area of Brixen. They came from Austria (North Tyrol, Upper Austria); Germany and Slovenia.





Some of these Sisters were repeatedly elected to the service of the abbess.

Sisters from four communities currently live in the Poor Clares monastery in Brixen. In 1997/98 the seven Sisters from the dissolved Poor Clares monastery in Taisten/South Tyrol were added. In 2017 we took in five of the Sisters from the dissolved Poor Clare monastery in Maria Enzersdorf, Austria, which was founded in 1964 by the Poor Clare monastery in Scharnhorststrasse in Münster, Germany. When the monasteries of Maria Enzersdorf/Austria and Brixen/South Tyrol were merged, two of the founding Sisters were still living.

Four nationalities are currently united in Brixen: of the currently fourteen Sisters, nine are South Tyrolean, three come from Austria, one is from Germany and one is Swiss.

Among those who are showing interest in our way of life, two are from Austria and one from Switzerland.



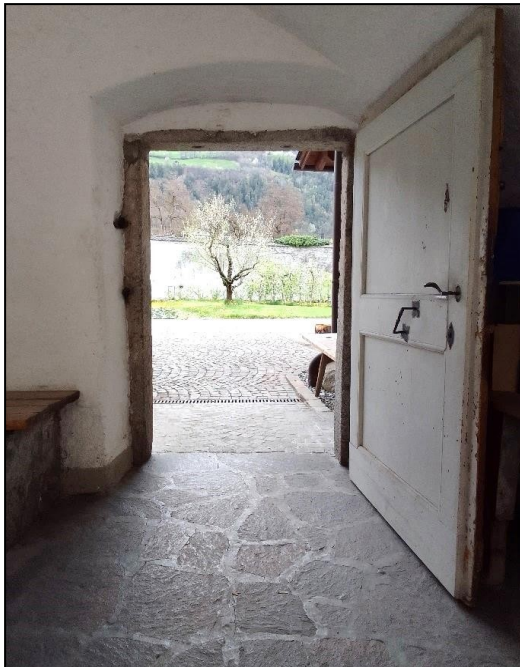


Some South Tyrolean women are also visiting us, but they are either too young, too occupied with other things, or too old!

South Tyrol belonged to Austria until 1918. In the Peace Treaty of St. Germain, the area south of the Brenner Pass was handed over to Italy in 1919. In 1972 South Tyrol became an autonomous province of Italy. For historical reasons, our country South Tyrol is trilingual: German (69.4%), Italian (26.6%) and Ladin (4.5%).

We are grateful to live in this beautiful little country.

Sr. Helmtrude Klara, osc





... to Porto Alegre, Brazil

On 30 August we celebrated 70 years of presence in this place chosen by God to found this house of prayer, preparing for a jubilee year with many celebrations and other events.

A bit of history

The request for the foundation was made by the Brothers of the Province of St. Francis of Assisi, Brazil. They sent Br. Celso Brancher to Belgium to make contact with the Sisters of the Clare-Colette Federation, to see which ones God was calling to come and establish the foundation.

After accepting the request, Sr. Maria Josefa, Sr. Maria Filipa, Sr. Maria Francisca and Sr. Maria Coleta began preparations for their departure on mission. Numerous civil and religious authorities accompanied the moment of the sending of the Sisters in the Holy Mass celebrated on 16 July,





1953. These were very emotional and faith-filled moments for those leaving and for those remaining. According to the chronicles, the farewell of the Sisters was characterized by three different phases.

On 18 June 1953, an official farewell party took place at the Institute of Fine Arts St. Luke with the artists of the famous Haydn Quartet from Brussels. On that occasion, the Belgian Minister of State gave an official speech alluding to the commemoration, in which he emphasized the importance of the first Belgian foundation in the South of Brazil, reinforcing the merit of the creation of a new 'San Damiano' at the end of the immense Brazil, in Porto Alegre.

Furthermore, the minister offered those present a touching image of the State of Rio Grande do Sul, 240 times the size of Belgium, but with a serious shortage of priests. It should be noted that an important aspect of the Sisters' coming to Brazil was their sacrifice for the sanctification of priests. Prayer and offering constitute some of the fundamental characteristics of the mission.



The farewell to the Sisters, in the Ghent Monastery on July 5 of the same year, took place with the church packed with people who wanted to bid the missionaries farewell.

Representatives of the Friars Minor of Belgium, the Abbot of the Benedictines of Termonde, various intellectu-



als and well-known personalities attended. It was said that departure is always painful, but it gives the opportunity to withdraw into oneself and seek first the Kingdom of God.

During the farewell rite, the Sisters prostrated themselves before the altar, while the Father Provincial handed each of the missionaries the blessed crosses. After the rite the official hymn of the missionaries' departure, 'Ave Maris Stella', was sung. The ritual continued until the final blessing. On the day of embarkation, July 16, a motorcade took the delegations to Schiphol Airport, which included the Sisters of Ghent, Termond and Ecklo, along with religious families and other representatives and Superiors of the Orders. The plane took off at 12:00 for Geneva, Lisbon, Africa and Recife, arriving in Rio de Janeiro on July 17.

The next day at 7 am, the Sisters boarded the Varig flight for Porto Alegre. They were welcomed at the airport by the Archbishop of Porto Alegre, Mgr Vicente Scherer, the civil authorities, the religious, the friars of the Province of St. Francis and many local people.

The Sisters were housed in the Nossa Senhora do Bom Conselho College of the Franciscan Sisters of Penance and Christian Charity for a month, while waiting for work to be completed on the new house that would serve as a monastery.

It is important to note that the first Belgian mission in Brazil occurred in the year of the seventh centenary of the death of St. Clare, and to pay attention to the meaning of the name given to the new convent in Porto Alegre: 'San Damiano'. In fact, it is the same name as the first church restored by St. Francis and the place where his first Sisters settled in seclusion. The new monastery, therefore, continued the same Franciscan spirit.

During their stay at the College, Mother Abbess, Maria Josefa and Mother Vicar, Maria Coleta supervised the adaptation of the house and also took the opportunity to perfect their knowledge of Portuguese. The official inauguration



was presided over by the then Archbishop Mgr. Vicente Scherer. This took place in this renovated old house on 30 August 1953 at 9 am. After the public visit during the day, the ceremony in which the Sisters' seclusion was established was a very emotional moment, in which the Sisters, smiling and jovial, bid farewell to the world from which they were parting forever to live within the walls of that house.

This brief historical account was made during the Jubilee of the 70th anniversary of the foundation of the Monastery, on 30 August 2023. Throughout this period there is much to be said about the journey of the community which has always been numerically small. Those who reached Solemn Profession, however, persevered until the end of their long lives, when they were called by God to eternal life.

It has been and still is a story of excellent relations and mutual help with the Friars Minor, who at the time of our foundation belonged to the Province of the Holy Cross, of Minas Gerais, and who later founded the Province of San Francisco, in Rio Grande do Sul.

In 1983, to complete the presence of the three Orders, an SFO fraternity was founded at the monastery, called Santa Chiara, which lasted 25 years. Due to the death of many of its members, it was closed and the remaining members were integrated into another fraternity. It was a very active fraternity, especially in praying the Divine Office together with the Sisters and in Eucharistic adoration held in the fraternity house twice a week. Professions were celebrated every year on 17 November, the feast of St. Elizabeth of Hungary, patroness of the SFO.

The monastery was always much frequented by people seeking the Sisters for spiritual accompaniment, to talk about their problems and, above all, to entrust their intentions and those of their families to them. This was the reality that, due to the covid 19 pandemic, has forcibly changed, but is now slowly recovering. Attendance at daily Mass is



very good, despite a rather secularized social context that contributes to the decline in vocations. We feel it is important to share this type of difficulty so that it becomes a reason for prayer for those reading, imploring that the spirit of deep and constant prayer be reborn in families.

Another important topic for our monastery is the following. In 2018, the Church promulgated the document *Cor Orans* with new regulations for women's monastic communities. The main one is that when a monastery remains with only five solemnly or perpetually professed Sisters, it must affiliate with another or close. This was not the case at 'San Damiano' in Porto Alegre, which, even with the death of many Sisters, still had seven professed Sisters, but they were elderly and ill. So, in 2016, almost anticipating the Document, the Mother of the Holy Family Federation of the Poor Clare Sisters of Brazil, in the person of Mother Maria José de la Rosa Mystica, was asked to establish a new government in the monastery.

Therefore, on 5 July 2016, the Sisters of the monastery of Campina Grande, in northeast Brazil, arrived to take over the new government of the monastery: as abbess Sr. Maria Emanuela of the Trinity, as vicar Sr. Chiara Maria of the Poor and Crucified Jesus, and as discreet Sr. Maria Inês of the Heart of Jesus. At that time, the Minister Provincial of the Province of St. Francis, Br. Ignatius Dellazari, presented this project to the Congregation, which then appointed the government for three years. It was a very blessed experience. After concluding the 2016-2019 appointment period, normal elections have already taken place in the community.

Presently, the community has two novices in their second year and, for the moment, there are no new vocations. Since this southern Brazilian state has certain difficulties with religious practice, vocations are rare. What we always do is pray that the gaze of God the Provident Father will turn on us and give us this great grace.



To celebrate the Jubilee this year, we experienced Eucharistic celebrations each month with particular themes that alluded to events in Chronicles. The experience was very rich and its climax even richer. Numerous priests presided at the Holy Masses, at which there was no shortage of choirs to make the songs come alive.



Memory card of the Jubilee celebration of the 'San Damiano' Monastery where the façade of the monastery as it is today and the current community can be seen.



As we celebrate our Jubilee, we lift our hands up to our God, who in his immense mercy has blessed us. For along with the trials that are part of human life, there is great praise for his work in us, which we have no words to express. Only in the joy of our hearts can we understand such great love, which for 70 years has radiated out to all those who have been part of our lives and those who still are, because they live and help us praise God every day.

On the feast day of the Jubilee, two Holy Masses were celebrated, also with the presence of Sisters from neighboring monasteries (two Sisters from the Monastery of Cascael in Paraná: Sr. Maria Fátima and Sr. Maria Rafaela; two from the Monastery of Lages in Santa Catarina: Sr. Maria Emanuela and Sr. Maria Inês and three from Campina Grande: Mother Maria Letícia, Sr. Maria Verônica and Sr. Maria Vitória), which was a source of great joy for us.

The Sisters of Porto Alegre



Official Jubilee photo: the sisters of the community and those who visited us pictured together.

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