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Presentation

Communion and Communication 64 is being released on the threshold of the eighth centenary of the *Canticle of Brother Sun* and of *Audite Poverelle*, the two vernacular texts by Francis of Assisi and set to music by him, both written in San Damiano for the consolation of himself and the poor ladies who lived there.

In this issue, the 'song' of vv. 5-8 is made for us to listen to in depth by Br. Fábio Gomes, ofm, our General Delegate, who again urges us to bring the words of exhortation that Francis addresses to us into dialogue with each other and to verify the authenticity of our living by their light.

Stories of life and reflections follow: listening to them, we realize how that consoling experience continues today, in different latitudes, which springs from the certainty of faith that "the kingdom of God is among us" (cf. *Lk* 17:21); we are simultaneously participants and collaborators, as Holy Mother Clare sees us: "I judge you to be a coworker of God Himself and a support for the weak members of His ineffably Body (*3LAg*, 8; *CA:ED*, 50)."

From Central America (Mexico and Nicaragua) to West Africa (Togo), from Central-Eastern Europe (Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina) to North America (United States), from Mediterranean Africa (Morocco) to Northern Italy (Trentino-Alto Adige), the words of our sisters communicate "the better life of the spirit," strengthening in us the awareness that supports our vocational response, that of the primacy of the Spirit of the Lord and of his holy manner of working.

Could not this also be the contribution we offer to the people of God, to every man and woman that the Holy Year calls to become pilgrims of hope?



At the conclusion of this issue, and of the centenary year of the Stigmata of Francis, we linger again to look at that event, with the gaze of St. Clare.

Finally, we accept the invitation of Br. Pietro Messa, ofm to remember Isabella of France, the eighth centenary of whose birth will be celebrated in 2025.

Happy reading!

We sincerely thank the sisters and brothers who contributed to this issue 64.

We remind you that **cTc 65** will be published in **June 2025**.

We invite all of you to send us life stories and/or reflections on the last verses of the *Audite poverelle*:

“Those weighed down by sickness / and the others 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 will be crowned queen / in heaven with the Virgin Mary.”

Office Pro Monialibus

Letter of the General Delegate

Dear Sisters, Dear Brothers,
May the Lord give you peace!

In the last three issues of our magazine, we reflected on the first verse of the “The Canticle of Exhortation for the Ladies of San Damiano,” composed by St. Francis. We now consider the second stanza:

*Do not look to life outside,
for the life of the spirit is better.
I beg you out of great love
To use with discernment the alms the Lord gives you.*

Two main themes emerge from this verse, which I suggest we reflect on together: the primacy of the life of the spirit over a life of externals, and discretion with regard to the use of alms.

The primacy of the life of the spirit

Firstly, it is interesting to note, as Br. Carlo Paolazzi has done, that Francis does not contrast ‘life outside’ with ‘life within.’ On a first reading, the text could be misunderstood simply as a contrast between the life of the secular world - which Francis left at his conversion (*Testament of St. Francis*, 3) - and the ‘internal’ life of the cloistered world, which Clare led at San Damiano.

Instead, Francis contrasts ‘life outside’ with the ‘life of the spirit’, implying that the real opposition is not between ‘outside’ and ‘inside’, but between ‘life according to the flesh, and life according to the spirit’ (*Rom* 8:5-9) - between ‘the spirit of the flesh’ and the ‘Spirit of the Lord’ (cf. *ER* 17:10-16). In other words, between two different ways of



being: one where our egoistic self (the flesh) takes priority, and the other where primacy is given to God and to the life of the spirit.

The primacy of the life of the spirit

From these two ways of being derive, respectively, two different ways of living both Christian and religious life, because, as Francis explains: “the spirit of the flesh very much desires and strives to have the words but cares little for the activity; it does not seek a religion and holiness in an interior spirit, but wants and desires to have a religion and a holiness outwardly apparent to people.” (cf. *ER* 17,11).

Therefore, the choice to be made again and again is between a superficial Christian and religious life, made up of externals and formalism, and a profound and coherent Christian and religious life, permeated by the paschal mystery of Christ, which desires above all things ‘to have the Spirit of the Lord and his holy operation’ (*LR* 10,9); in other words, a life in which primacy is given to the Lord and his Spirit.

In this sense, we must always be alert to the risk, which Pope Francis warns us against, of “spiritual worldliness, which hides behind the appearance of piety and even love for the Church, [and] consists in seeking not the Lord’s glory but human glory and personal well-being.”

Discretion with regard to almsgiving

A clear sign that one is walking according to the primacy of the Spirit is the attitude of discretion - of discernment - that Francis applied to the issue of almsgiving in regard to Clare whose great austerity led her to deprive herself even of the most basic necessities. For this reason, ‘with great love,’ in their concern for her health, Francis, together with the Bishop of Assisi, ordered her ‘not to let a day go by without eating at least an ounce and a half of bread as a meal’ (*Legend of St. Clare* 18:7).

On the other hand, discretion also warns us against the opposite extreme - i.e. a certain permissiveness that leads



us to waste the goods of creation, giving in to the temptation of consumerism. Indeed, in one of his Admonitions, Francis affirms that where there is mercy and discretion, there is no harshness, but neither is there superfluity (cf. *Admonitions* 27,6).

Discretion with regard to almsgiving

I believe, however, that we can apply discretion/discernment not only to our relationship with material goods, but also to all other 'alms', i.e. to all the benefits we receive from the divine 'great Almsgiver'.

Above all, we need the discretion that is necessary in regard to the greatest benefit 'that we have received and continue to receive daily from the generosity of the Father of all mercy' - that is, our vocation (*Testament of St. Clare*, 2). Indeed, since our vocation is a gift that we continue to receive, a continuous personal and community discernment is necessary in order to evaluate how we are cultivating and responding to such a precious gift.

A necessary discretion is also required in interpersonal relationships, especially those involving the sisters and brothers of the community, gifts given to us by the Lord (*Testament of St. Francis*, 14). The Lord gives them to us every day, so that we can walk ever more united in following him, accepting each other with our virtues and frailties.

The primacy of the life of the spirit and discretion with regard to almsgiving

Sisters and Brothers, at the end of another year, I believe that these two themes on which Francis has invited us to reflect can help us to evaluate all that we have experienced in the last number of months and to decide on resolutions for the coming year.

It is an opportune moment to ask ourselves whether the primacy of the life of the spirit has been the prevailing motivation in all our lives and in our activities during the year



that is drawing to a close. We can also decide to make this primacy the fundamental criterion of discernment in regard to how we will accept and treat all the 'alms' that the divine 'Almsgiver' will grant us in the coming year.

Merry Christmas and a blessed 2025!
May God bless you,

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

¹ Cf. C. Paolazzi, The Exhortation, "*Listen, little poor ones called by the Lord,*" [cTc n. 62, p. 12](#).

² Pope Francis, [Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World](#) (24 november 2013), n. 93.

Audite Poverelle



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

**Do not look to life outside,
for the life of the spirit is better.
I beg you out of great love
To use with discernment the alms
the Lord gives you...**

...to Borgo Valsugana, Italy

It is impossible to listen to these verses of the *Listen, little poor ones*, and not be aware of how it touches our conscience and how it invites us to be honest about the ever-growing seduction from the subtle calls of that 'life without' which we have left. However, if we are called to conversion, we cannot grow tired of opening ourselves to the light that falls upon a heart which desires the True and the Good.

Let us listen to Francis again.

In fact he is returning to a theme which was dear to him and which turns up a number of times in his writings: that of refusing every form of show. Francis loved dramatic gestures of faith, of poverty or of penance, as when he stripped himself in the piazza or made Brother Masseo take off his clothes, and he goes straight to the heart of the question. The life of the spirit always follows the logic of the Incarnation. For this reason, he always sees himself as 'without' but he has no masks nor does he manipulate reality with the aim of avoiding the eyes of the Lord. He has the drive and the clarity of an index finger pointing towards the Son of God made poor for us, or towards the na-





kedness of sin which is an indigence of heart, of mind and of human action.

Among all the verses of the Canticle, this is the one which, at first glance, seems least consonant with the life of Clare and the sisters. Yet the sources tell us unambiguously that for Clare of Assisi, as for Agnes of Prague, it was precisely the poverty of the Son of God which was the most threatened aspect of their following of Christ. In the *Second Letter* we read: «believing nothing, agreeing to nothing which would make you want to call this back, or which would place a stumbling block in your way. In that case you would not be giving back your vows to the Most High in that perfection to which the Spirit of the Lord has called you.» (2Ag 14)

Francis still invites us to be alert in order to understand the aspects of the life without which confront us today, trying to distract our gaze with the suggestion that they are better than the life of the spirit. Perhaps one of these aspects is that which offers the myth of visibility, of fame, of the ability to influence others in their choices (the famous influencers) but also that which chases a kind of fitness, a well-being which can set us apart from the preoccupations and anxieties of life, from the fatigue of living together or from the weight of routine. The life without is that which externalises everything. It wants to take something for itself from reality but without any link to the holy working of the Spirit which by contrast seeks to «strive for humility and patience, the pure, simple and true peace of the spirit» (ER XVII:15,16). Perhaps even our preoccupation with the decline of vocations may even be one form of looking at the life without.

This little verse of the *Listen, little poor ones* has an undeniable relevance for us, inviting us to place ourselves in an attitude of listening to what is better according to the Spirit while at the same time not losing sight of this. Are we keeping it always before our eyes even while we look at life in the concrete and listen to the requests and guidelines of



the Church about the pathways of evangelical renewal and while we find how to unite them to the charism which we have been given? We are not speaking here about defending any aspect of the charism but of investing it - like the talent which has been given to bring a profit for the Kingdom of God. It is like the seed, confident that the fruit it bears is not its own possession, accepting its own death in the furrow of earth.

We would like to share with you a small option which we have made in recent years, moved by the desire not to lose sight of the heart of our life. It is a choice whose goodness has not shown success but each time, it has shown itself to be a service which is freely animated and energised. Our community is almost 40 years old, having been born on 25 August 1984 when the Protomonastery of St. Clare sent four sisters in response to a request from the then Archbishop of Trent, Msgr. Alessandro Maria Gottardi and of the Friars Minor of what was at that time the Trent Province of San Vigilio. Right from the first months of the foundation, the pastoral care of vocations among the young people had been close to our hearts. Working in collaboration, first with the friars and then with some Franciscan sisters of apostolic life, we offered boys and girls a couple of days a month when they could stay in the guest house for a time of retreat. Over the years, we wanted to focus particularly on young people and to respond to their request for a meeting 'al femminile' - among women. Behind this request we sensed that there was something deeper: a need to experience faith, to meet the Lord and - with the clarian charism -to do so with 'the heart of a woman'. They wanted to experience how their own feminine humanity can find fulfilment in a relationship with God. We quickly found that the withdrawal of a retreat needed some reconstruction. As a start, we rearranged the themes, focussing them on the liturgical year. Both the span and the circular nature of this enabled us to go deeper into the mystery of Christ and at the same time into the mystery of humanity in which they were living. This seemed to us the truest and most beautiful way of sharing



with the young people those things which gave us life and which worked to transform us into a likeness of the Lord.

The journey of the retreats is, above all, a journey of faith, not only the vocational enterprise which we watched being born as a fruit of this deepening of their relationships with the Lord. We have accompanied the greater part of the young people towards marriage, some towards a secular consecration or towards some Franciscan Institute of apostolic life. Only one so far has asked to begin a journey of discernment with us or with another community. To accompany this vocational discernment among the young and to have the privilege which it gives of seeing the work of God in each one, has been a precious enrichment of our hearts and indeed of our faith. It generates great hope in the future of the Church, of the family, of the world. At this time, when we are tempted not to have great faith in the future, we feel that this gift has come straight from hand of the Great Alms Giver. It confirms us in our awareness that the gifts given to us are for sharing and that they must be placed at the service of those who knock at our door seeking the Source of their lives, seeking the One to whom everything belongs.

The Sisters of Borgo Valsugana
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...to Lomé, Togo

This Canticle of Exhortation beginning with the words *Listen, little poor one* is a sort of testament addressed by St. Francis to the sisters of San Damiano. In a few words, and in poetic terms, he expresses his last wishes to St. Clare and her sisters:

- that they understand that God is the source of life for the poor sisters of today and those to come.
- that they see themselves as ‘little poor ones’ called by the Lord to poverty.
- that they use with discernment the alms that the Lord sends them.
- that they observe obedience with love and charity, following Christ's example.
- that they embrace the life of the Spirit rather than that of the outside world.

In essence, Francis, through this Canticle, retraces the essence of the Form of Life of the Sisters of San Damiano, as expressed in St. Clare's request to Pope Innocent and as recopied by the latter in the Bull introducing the Rule: “We have before us your humble request that we confirm by Our Apostolic authority the Form of Life that Blessed Francis gave you and which you have freely accepted. According [to this form of life] you should live together in unity of spirits and in the profession of the highest poverty. Our venerable brother, the Bishop of Ostia and Velletri has seen fit to approve this way of life...”

Does this exhortation of Francis to the sisters of San Damiano still hold its value to disturb and shake us up in our Monastery of St. Clare in Lomé? How is this invitation from Saint Francis lived out and kept alive in the reality of our daily life today?



In this article, we consider these questions under three headings:

- Life in a community of sisters,
- Poverty and minority,
- The life of the Spirit as a means of living our life of withdrawal from the world to the full.

Life in a community of sisters

This Canticle of Francis addressed to St. Clare and her Sisters has a special connotation for our community. It is read as an introduction to the send-off that takes place on the eve of each sister's retreat.

In our community of around twenty sisters of five nationalities (Togo, Benin, Ivory Coast, Democratic Congo, Burkina-Faso), interculturality is a rich, lived reality. With the contribution of each sister, it is a source of thanksgiving. This is most evident in the liturgy, where the inclusion of gestures, symbols and songs from different cultures makes our liturgy rich and diverse. The language chosen and spoken for the time being in community remains French.

Interculturality is also reflected in our fraternal life at table: as meals are a powerful moment of communion, sharing and conviviality, menus are diversified to take into account each of our cultures. Being sisters does not mean seeking ideological affinities, but recognizing that it is in Jesus that we are children of the same Father.

We experience how sickness is a source of tribulation for both the sister who is suffering and those who care for her. Our fraternal life is an expression of charity, mercy and compassion. We are constantly concerned to care for our suffering members in community, and this service of caring for the sick is entrusted to selected sisters.

Our consecration is a divine action, a free call from God: "Little poor ones, listen to me, you who are called by the Lord!" We are aware that we are first and foremost called to



live, to praise God and to stimulate all men and women to glorify Him in His Holy Church.

Prayer is what makes our being fraternal possible. Our days open with the Divine Office: a personal and communal encounter with the God of Jesus Christ, abiding in God and allowing ourselves to be inhabited by Him. Our union with Christ is expressed in daily life through:

- Listening to and meditating on the Word of God, where we are shaped,
- Celebrating the Eucharist and living adoration, where we recognize ourselves as daughters and servants, and receive the community as a gift.

Jesus Christ is the centre of gravity of our community life. It is in Him that we recognise ourselves as sisters. The relationship that binds us together is based on this foundation. The same shared life project is our guide: “By this, all will know that you are my disciples, by the love you have for one another.”

The Gospel values that govern our fraternal life are:

- A family spirit lived in Simplicity and Poverty with mutual respect,
- Holy Unity lived in diversity and recognition of the gifts of God given to each of us.





Poverty and minority

There is a harmony between poverty and minority and these are fundamental values of our Charism.

In her *Testament* and in her *Rule*, Clare specifies the form of poverty she has chosen: living without possessions or a stable income: “neither to receive nor to have possessions or property, either by themselves or through others” (*RCI* 6,12; *TestCI* 53-55).

For us, choosing poverty means sharing the life of the poor Christ in the realities of everyday life. In our countries, where misery is on the increase and the consecrated person is perceived as rich in material goods, our life as “poor sisters” is a witness, but also a great challenge, requiring of us a permanent conversion. Seeing a nun begging from door to door is seen as an “insult” to the poor, so we don't go door to door collecting. Certainly, we live off providence, but most of the time we see the fruit of our labour as alms sent to us by the Lord.

St. Clare urges us to receive work as a grace and to take it on with joy. Work is part of our option of poverty, an expression of our solidarity. Through our work, we reach out to all our brothers and sisters of the human family who work hard to earn a living. Many poor people knock on our door, and we want them to feel that we are on their side, that we make our own their concerns and want to do something about their needs.

The community has chosen sisters to listen





and share what we have with the poor, in a spirit of discernment that avoids excess and abuse.

Our activities include: hospitality - we have a guest house where people come to recharge their batteries, crafts - the making of liturgical ornaments (hand embroidery), candles, wine as well as tending livestock and gardening.

Minority is a fundamental value of our Franciscan spirituality. Our vocation as “poor sisters” places us among the least, the marginalised and the defenceless of our society. In our lifestyle we try to reflect :

- A spirit of simplicity,
- A spirit of sobriety,
- A spirit of Franciscan poverty and fraternity,
- Detachment from a desire to hoard, thirst for domination and selfishness,
- The right use of the goods placed at our disposal and the alms that the Lord sends.

The life of the Spirit as a means of living in fullness our life of withdrawal from the world

St. Clare chose to live in seclusion from the world, in order to welcome people and share their lives and aspirations more deeply.

For us, the most intimate enclosure is the heart, the space where life blossoms. “The life of the Spirit” is the better part says Saint Francis. How difficult it is! Today more than ever, the digital world brings us a multitude of information, a multiplicity of sounds and words accompanied by images that enrich us, but also affect our inner being and hold us captive to life on the outside. How can we use the richness of these means of communication without allowing ourselves to be invaded and distracted from the essential? The life of the Spirit is a way of living our life of withdrawal from the world to the full.

Our fraternal life is intended to be :

- A place to experience and bear witness to the living God among us,



- A place to rekindle our faith,
- A place of prayer and of seeking the Lord in song of praise,
- An offering of the cry of entreaty on behalf of all our brothers and sisters in the human family,
- Thanksgiving in the heart of our Mother the Church,
- A place to celebrate what God has done, is doing and will do for all of His creation.

St. Francis and St. Clare pioneered the concept of a fraternal life open to all, without distinction of class, and this is their legacy to us. The doors of our monastery are open to all. Men and women of all races, languages and nations are present in our life at every moment. They come to pray with us, entrust themselves to our prayers, share their joys and sorrows as well as our own, and sometimes they are simply there.

In order to safeguard our freedom of heart and mind, without which we run the risk of becoming alienated from the outside world, our community has chosen a number of means of communication to keep us informed:

- Radio: we listen to the news together every day during lunchtime, except on feast days and solemnities,
- Publications: we subscribe to two magazines,
- Television: we watch the news together twice a week (Tuesday and Thursday) and on certain Sundays we watch a film together,
- Social networks: we use WhatsApp and the Internet.

As pilgrims and strangers in this world, we recognize the distance between the ideal and reality. The world and history are also the temple where God dwells. It is in reality, in the world and in history that God has chosen to reveal himself. And yet to close ourselves off to “life outside” is to open ourselves up to the movements of the Spirit. Poverty goes hand in hand with fraternal relationships: receiving and giving are the two sides of almsgiving, the fruit of the non-appropriation that underpins our freedom in the face of the



goods of this world. To claim to lead a life of prayer without caring about others is pure spiritualism. In fraternal life, we are offered the opportunity to let the beauty of love shine forth, which is a participation in the *quality* of love revealed to us in the Son. In the heart of the Rule, Clare tells her sisters that “they must above all desire to have the Spirit of the Lord and his holy operation” (*RCI* 10). May God grant us to live always in praise of Him.

The Sisters of Lomé
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...to Casablanca, Morocco

BISMILLAH - A Poor Clare presence in Morocco

Bismillah: In the name of the Lord.

This is the refrain which precedes and accompanies every Muslim activity in Morocco, from the taxi driver to the doctor to the student to the housewife.

These words are dear to me because they are also the very words with which our mother St. Clare begins the *Rule*: “In the Name of the Lord”.

To speak of a Poor Clare presence in Morocco inevitably means beginning with Clare herself who ‘said that she wanted to go there’ and she said it in such a way that the sisters really feared she would realise this wish of hers. This was out



of love for martyrdom and for the first friars minor who were martyred at Marrakesh in 1219, for they were all men from Umbria and possibly known at San Damiano.

Sister Cecilia nun of the monastery of San Damiano, said under oath that the aforesaid Lady Clare had such a fervent spirit she willingly wanted to endure martyrdom for love of the Lord. She showed this when, after she had heard certain bro-



thers had been martyred in Morocco, she said she wanted to go there. Then, because of this, the witness wept. This was before she was so sick.

And again, Sister Balvina di Messere Martino da Cocorano, nun of the monastery of San Damiano, said under oath: that she, the Lady, had such a fervent spirit that she would willingly have endured martyrdom for the defence of the faith and her Order for the love of God. Before she was sick, she desired to go to those parts of Morocco where it was said the brothers had suffered martyrdom. Asked how she knew these things, she replied that she, the witness, had been with the Lady for all the time and saw and heard of the love of the faith and the Order the Lady had.(cf. *Acts of Canonization of St. Clare*)

A Short History of the Community

This love of the faith and of the Order of Clare's had to wait some centuries before it could be realised when, 1989, a group of five Mexican Poor Clares left the Monastery of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe de San Luis de Potosí



(Mexico) at the invitation of the brothers of the Custody of the Franciscan Protomartyrs in Morocco, as well as that of the Archbishop of Rabat, Msgr. Hubert Michon. They settled at Casablanca which now has about 5,500,000 inhabitants where they lived in a former Dominican convent, in the



heart of the city. From outside it seemed noisy and short of space, then beyond was a courtyard and some flowerbeds, then there was a public library open to the public. The Mexican sisters have maintained our presence in the land of Islam until 2021 when, at the height of the Covid epidemic and at the invitation of our new Minister General, Br. Massimo Fusarelli, ofm, the sisters responded to an international appeal for help in monasteries in the Congo, Ivory Coast and Vietnam, to which they sent four sisters.

In 2022, at the request of the new Minister General Br. Massimo Fusarelli, ofm, the Dicastery for Institutes of the Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life had nominated a new superior and the community [in Morocco] began again with six sisters who came from five countries and four continents. They had two clear parameters: an Invitation to move to a city where there were friars minors who would guarantee formation and the sacraments, and the project of building a new monastery in a place better adapted to our way of life.

Our Archbishop, Cardinal Cristóbal López Romero, sdb, had put some land in Rabat at our disposal. Little by little, we set about constructing the building of community life among ourselves and those given us by Providence in response the call to live in the heart of Islam and at the same time to build the walls within which we can preserve the silent Presence of the Lord. There is much to do!

Do not look at the life outside for that of the spirit is better

Our small and young community is surrounded by the loving care and special solicitude of the brothers in the Custody and the whole local Church which is made up of priests of Fidei Donum and the faithful. Few of these are European but come mostly from Subsaharan Africa, people who are young in age and in faith, filled with energy and fraterni-



ty. Geographically the diocese is huge, one of the largest in the world, and the community of the faithful is small, only about 30,000 in the whole Diocese. It is they who are helping us learn to know Morocco and Moroccan Islam. This is a Church which is simple and lightweight, knowing nothing of great buildings, one which is always starting again because neither the faithful nor the clergy nor the religious are local and do not stay long in one place. This means that everything is both dynamic and transitory. The Church here is challenged, concretely and with creativity, as it responds to the needs of the catholics, the demands of service to the migrants and above all the dialogue with Islam.

This is a small reality, but one which tells a very great and beautiful story: the presence of St. Charles de Foucauld, of Fr. Albert Peyriguère, of Br. Charles-André Poissonnier and other significant figures in this Church who all invite us to learn how to shout aloud the Gospel with our lives. What a beautiful challenge! Here, where everything is small, the task is enormous and is being carried forward with so much care and dedication. For me, this is a source of great wonder, as is the care and solicitude of the General Curia of the

Friars Minor for this tiny presence, both for the brothers who are here and for us!

We are working hard together to understand what it means to be a contemplative presence in this country and how to express it, how to qualify it, what are the challenges and what are the criteria we should adopt, how we live our own faith in a context where we are such a minority.





We are a work in progress, open on one side to the charisma and on the other to inculturation, we need to understand the country which welcomes us as well as its faith, of which we are completely ignorant.

I beg you with great love to use with discretion the alms given you by the Lord.

Ad intra, like every Poor Clare community, we began by organising the work of our hands in order to live.

The work is that of Altar breads which we produce for the whole of Morocco and a workshop for liturgical artefacts, and our shop for which some make handicrafts (the only place in Casablanca where you can buy rosaries, crucifixes...) along with our guest house (two rooms!), these together with the generosity of the faithful and the Diocese, all guarantee us enough to live on.

Another big work is that of the Liturgy, building a common repertoire and introducing Arabic (for the Angelus, rosary, Our Father) in order not to forget where we are! We are also working on forming our own style. Coming as we do from such different communities we feel a need to organise the offices, the house, the 'things' of the house, all according to a style yet to be discovered which is emerging from everyday activities.

Ad extra, we have made some choices, ie to visit some of the country's sites and to invest in formation. We





had a chance, one filled with emotion, to visit Marrakesh and the place where the first martyr brothers of our Order were martyred, and the Square of the Mosque of Koutoubia where our Brothers proclaimed the Lord Jesus Christ. We also went to Tangiers, to visit the only other monastery of contemplative life in Morocco today, that of the Carmelite sisters. They opened up their house and their hearts to us, sharing the silent beauty of being a tabernacle in a foreign land. In addition we have given time and energy to formation and above all to learning about the Franciscan presence in Morocco during these 800 years, as well as about Islam and the Koran, thanks to the precious help of our brothers.

Bit by bit we are learning to know Islam as a living reality. Surprisingly the Moroccans are generally welcoming, curious and very respectful of our faith and the fact that we are women of prayer, something which they immediately recognise from our habits! Our neighbours are friendly and during their festivals, willingly share dates, harira (a traditional lentil soup) and fruit tarts with us. We have two language teachers, one for French and one for classical Arabic, both young Moroccan women who are helping us enter into a world which is being very welcoming to us. They are very different from each other: Oumkeltoum is highly intelligent with a committed and motivated faith, she is rigorously and elegantly veiled. Miriam is celibate, wears jeans and is evidently a lay woman. Between these two friends, Morocco is showing us two of her faces.

The dream of Clare continues to be realised in a community which is small and relevant, in this land of 'Otherness', at a time when both the Church and history seek to work silently and tirelessly so that, in seeking God and His kingdom, we also find brothers and sisters. As for the brothers who go 'among the Saracens and non-believers' they can live spiritually in two ways. One way is not to engage in arguments or disputes but to be subject to every human creature for



God's sake and to acknowledge that they are Christians. The other way is to announce the Word of God when they see it pleases the Lord in order that they may believe in Almighty God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Creator of all, the Son, the Redeemer and Saviour and be baptised and become Christians because no-one can enter the kingdom of God without being reborn of water and the Holy Spirit." (ER XVI,1-3)

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...to Roswell, USA

As we close the celebration of our diamond jubilee year of foundation, we are gratefully and deeply aware of how our foundresses, traveling to “unknown Roswell” in 1948, took great care to live these words of our Father St. Francis, and to bequeath their own vibrant example of fidelity and creativity in true Franciscan living to successive generations of Roswell Poor Clares.

Mother Immaculata, our founding abbess, knew well the importance of providing a beautiful environment in which contemplatives could dwell together in the joy of praising God for the wonders of His creation. She was also concerned to give her growing community ample outdoor space for prayer and solitude on retreat days and Sundays. To this end, she made certain that sufficient land was taken into the



The Roswell monastery in 1948

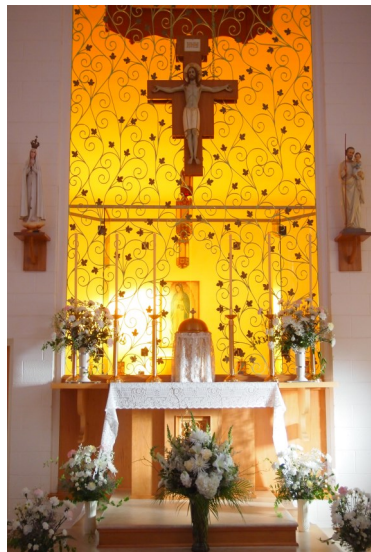


enclosure for the use of the sisters, and enough buffer land maintained outside the enclosure wall to ensure the quiet and peace of the monastic cloister. The abbesses who have succeeded her in office have also emphasized the need for a beautiful and well-maintained garden and grounds for the community. Having a beautiful space in which to live deepens our contentment with our enclosed life, and makes us eager to return when necessity calls us out for medical appointments or other necessary excursions. All the sisters feel a common responsibility for the maintenance and beautification of our house and grounds; and because all are involved in the cleaning of the house and weekly “garden days”, a special personal connection with our monastic home and grounds is created which dims the desire to go anywhere beyond this beautiful small patch of earth. While appreciating invitations to “virtual pilgrimages” elsewhere, we do not find them necessary. We have and appreciate the beauty already present around us.

Keeping our monastic library filled with texts which inspire and enrich the “life of the Spirit” is also vitally important. There are so many riches in our library that a lifetime is not sufficient to plumb them all!

This focuses our minds and spirits on “that which is above” and helps us to deepen our understanding of our own call to live as spouses of the Holy Spirit.

Mother Mary Francis often wrote and spoke of the riches within each of our sisters; these too will never be fully plumbed. In our community, sisters have the opportunity to offer



The Roswell monastery choir



brief presentations at the beginning of our Sunday recreation hour on topics about which they have a special interest. Past subjects have included the fascinating botany of the Shroud of Turin, the reading of a selection of poetry describing the change of seasons, the life of St. Josemaría Escrivá, a slideshow tour of one sister's native Australia, and even the inner workings of our recently acquired beehive. We find that the riches are so vast and deep that "the life of the Spirit" within our blessed enclosure leaves us no need to go further than our own monastic grounds to discover an unending waterfall of inspiration from the hearts of our sisters. Our Lord has blessed our monastery with generous friends and benefactors, and it is a constant challenge to safeguard our life of poverty as we strive to discern what we truly need, and what can be shared with those whose poverty is debilitating and difficult to bear. Care is taken by our Mother Vicarress and the sisters who serve as portresses to gather together any extra foodstuffs which we receive and distribute them through the help of friends, so that the poor in our area may benefit from them. Some items are shared locally, others with the needy in Mexico, and others as far away as Africa. We find great joy in sharing the alms we receive; God's providence has always provided for us, and to the tender Father of Mercies above all do we give thanks.

It is a profound source of joy and thanksgiving for us as we approach our seventy-sixth anniversary of foundation on



November 13, 2024, to look back to the beginning of our presence in New Mexico and see how faithfully our Mothers and Sisters have striven to keep the flame of Holy Father Francis' and Holy



Mother Clare's ideal burning. Great sacrifices were required of our foundresses to create and maintain this monastic cloister in beauty, simplicity and poverty. We desire to continue to live this precious legacy, praying that the words of our seraphic Father always will be emblazoned upon our daily lives.

The "life of the Spirit" is indeed better than anything the "the life that is outside" can offer the heart of a Poor Clare!

The Sisters of Roswell
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Our community at our 2020 Militia Immaculata consecration



...to Nazarje, Slovenia

A Hymn to Divine Providence

We are approaching the 50th anniversary of the return of the Poor Clares to Slovenian soil, by the grace of God, after an absence of 200 years.

The first sisters arrived in our territory in 1300, shortly after the death of St. Clare. In a short time, God caused seven monasteries to spring up and flourish, from which constant praise was raised to the Almighty and intercession for our people. These monasteries were cultural and spiritual centres of the area. Unfortunately, in 1782, when the Emperor Joseph II dissolved the last of the monasteries, they were all suppressed. Thus, the seed of Clare's charism, which had fallen into the darkness of the earth, waited 200 years to bear fruit and see the light again in our homeland. This miraculously happened in 1978, thanks to the prayers



and sufferings of the exiled Poor Clares, to the blood and sufferings of our countless martyrs and, above all, to the plan of God's grace.

As there were no longer any Poor Clare monasteries in Slovenia, our young women followed God's call abroad to follow the path of Clare's charism. When Marija Kozina, Sr. Imakulata, fell ill with typhus and her priest uncle, Dr. Franc Trdan, brought her an image of the French



Poor Clare of Bordeaux, Maria Celina of the Presentation, now blessed, she made a vow: 'If, through your intercession, I am healed, I will go to the monastery where you were'. Indeed, although already given up for dead by the doctors, she was miraculously healed through the intercession of little Celina. In 1929, on the advice of her uncle, instead of going to France she entered the monastery of the Urbanist Poor Clares in Split, Croatia, where on 2nd October 1930, at the reception of the religious habit she was given the name Sr. Marija Imakulata of Christ the King.

For almost fifty years, far from Slovenia, she prayed for her childhood dream to come true: to die in a monastery on a hill between two rivers, in her beloved homeland. Her faith was unshakable; she hoped against hope. When she and a few sisters founded a new monastery in Zagreb, her long cherished wish was strengthened. Indeed, in Zagreb two more Slovenians joined her: Mother Marija Katarina (Martina Ambrož) and Mother Marija Jozefina (Valerija Petrič). The number was sufficient to create a new foundation. They immediately began to pray to return to Slovenia, God willing. They took refuge under the protection of Our Lady, promising that the first monastery would be dedicated to her, the Mother of God and our Mother, and that the first five sisters would bear her name. In the meantime, Sr. Imakulata fell ill and almost died: fluid had accumulated in her lungs, compromising the functioning of her heart. Sr. Katarina and Sr. Jozefina fervently implo-



*Nazarje 1986
The first three Sisters*



red Our Lady for the Lord's grace to keep her alive so that she could return to Slovenia. When the doctor examined her the next day, expecting to find her already dead, there was no trace of fluid in her lungs. He himself stated that it was not 'her medicine' that had done it. After two years of fervent prayers, the Slovenian sisters obtained all the necessary permits. In 1978, precisely on the centenary of Germana Castang's birth, Blessed Sr. M. Celina - but they did not know it at the time - they were finally allowed to return to their dear homeland.

When they left for Slovenia, Nazarje, they had practically nothing. Sr. M. Imakulata had literally risen from her deathbed, Sr. M. Katarina had a severe head injury, and Sr. M. Jozefina had severe pain in her spine. God, however, as so many times in history, had again chosen what is weak and despised in the eyes of this world, to make it perfectly clear that the work was His alone; that the strength we have is not ours, but His gift to those who are willing to accept it with an open heart and with open hands, and to place themselves entirely at His disposal. They were in fact totally abandoned



Nazarje: The Chapel



to the will of God; their treasure was an unshakeable faith, an insuperable hope and trust in God and the Mother of God, to whom they were particularly consecrated. Hard-working and zealous, they were ready to make any sacrifice, docile instruments in the hands of God; and the Divine Builder disposed of them according to his holy will.

They immediately set to work with their hands. People saw their sacrifice and diligence, their genuine evangelical life, and God inclined the hearts of the local residents to come to their aid, now one, now another, as and when needed. Thus, through them, God quickly built his sanctuary and, by the anniversary of their arrival, they had already moved into the new monastery, whose only solid and secure foundation was Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Mary. The poor dwelling, then still without windows and doors - in the Franciscan spirit of total poverty - became immeasurably richer than any cathedral in which the Blessed Sacrament is no longer present. In their chapel, the Eternal Light was kindled and has not been extinguished since...

The sisters grew in confidence day by day, year after year. In accordance with the vow made, the new monastery in Nazarje was dedicated to the Immaculate Conception. While the Lord was busy building his new shrine, he was also beginning the formation and 'construction' of living shrines: noble souls whom he had endowed with the priceless gift of a holy vocation and whom he himself was educating in the school of his Sacred Heart and the Immaculate Heart of Mary, until they knocked at the monastery door and received the holy habit of the Order of St. Clare.

God's spiritual gifts exceeded even his material care for us. The Lord soon filled the monastery with new sisters. In 1994, at the conclusion of the Jubilee Year of Clare on the 800th anniversary of her birth, the Holy See confirmed the canonical erection of the new monastery. In 2000, we were so many that we were like 'mystical bees' at the invitation of the Archbishop of Ljubljana, Bishop Franc Rodé. It was precisely on the 700th anniversary of the arrival of the first Poor



Clares on Slovenian soil that we were allowed to open a new tabernacle in our homeland. What a grace!

Our new home has become 'Pekova domačija' ('Pek family rustic house'. Pek = baker), the house where Mother Marija Katarina was born on the outskirts of the capital Ljubljana. With the help of good people, we turned it into a real House of Bread, where Jesus in the Holy Eucharist stays with us day and night. Our second monastery is dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

The Wisdom of God, like a great builder, has chosen the old, abandoned parish of Turnišče in north-west Slovenia as our third home. Just as St. Francis, when called by God to repair his Church, set to work to renew it, so too we rolled up our sleeves and, with the support of good people, set to work again. There was a time when the Prekmurje region was not only a place to harvest the fruits of the fields, but also a place to gather spiritual vocations. Today, however, as the noise of the world has largely covered or at least si-



Turnišče – The Chapel

lenced the voice of God in the people, the Lord prompted the Bishop of Murska Sobota, Bishop Peter Štumpf, to invite us to his diocese. Thus, on the occasion of the 800th anniversary of the Order of the Poor Clares, in 2012, we opened a 'spiritual infirmary', as the Bishop called our chapel, where the Divine Physician himself, in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, could heal



the souls and hearts of our afflicted brothers and sisters and open the eyes and ears of their hearts and minds. From the cross, Jesus entrusted us to the care of his Mother, the Mother of the Church, to whom our third monastery is consecrated, and made her the treasurer and mediatrix of all graces.

Our communities are like one heart and one soul: three rays of one flame of love of God and praise to the Most High for the great works God has done for us and continues to do in abundance for us, for our nation and for the whole world, every day. All is grace and eternity will be too short to thank Him enough. To Him, our God, “thanks and glory, wisdom and praise, honour and dominion and power for ever and ever! Amen!” (Rev 7:12).

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The Sisters in Nazarje



...to Brestovsko, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Each day, a large number of people knock on the door of our monastery. People from different cultures and religions bring us their problems and difficulties, they come seeking prayer, comfort and help. We try always to have hearts that are open for each one of them. Sometimes listening is all that



is needed, or the offering of a word of encouragement or a loving smile which can light a spark of joy in someone's heart. These people often say that at our monastery they feel a special and profound peace. God himself is near to those whose hearts are ready.

On the other side of the coin, day after day people come to our monastery who help us in a number of ways. It is God himself who cares for us through them. They ring the bell and leave a gift, sometimes without saying anything or giving their name. Between what we are given and what we already have, we try to help all those who knock at our door seeking material help. In this way, our lives are a continual

receiving and giving, receiving from others and giving to others.



During the 35 years of our existence, we have felt the great love of the people from this region, but also that of those from the whole of Bosnia



and Herzegovina, as well as from Croatia and beyond. Different pilgrim groups visit us: Young Franciscans, the Secular Franciscans, students, those who are seeking something, brothers in formation, deacons before ordination and so on. They all have a great respect and admiration for our way of life as well as many questions about our vocation, about prayer and about work. All these push us to think again and again about our vocation and our mission, about fidelity and about the integrity of our life.

Every vocation demands courage and perseverance; every life has its highs and lows, its crashes and its beginning-again. But we know we can do all things in Him who strengthens us. Only in Him is the fullness of life and the source of all joy. Our visitors often ask us where that joy comes from which they see on our faces and in our lives. Our reply is very simple: to recognise the call of God and respond to it is the source of a profound peace and of true joy. Then it does not matter where you live or what you do. We have recognised our call to be Poor Clares and there we have found happiness and fulfilment.

Gratitude and joy penetrate deeply into our lives and we find a daily occasion for them in so many ways: in work together carried to a successful conclusion, in moments of recreation, in the sight of our garden covered with snow or filled with coloured flowers. Every new vocation is an invitation to profound joy and gratitude. In recent years, God has sent our monastery an increasing number of vocations and we are always grateful to the Lord that young women should come and that the youth of our monastery is renewed year after year.

At the end of our garden there is a grotto with a statue of Our Lady of Lourdes. The blessed Virgin Mary is





the mediatrix of all graces, our vocations and the life of this monastery are the fruit of her intercession.

What do we have which has not been given us by God? Even she is given as a Mother. Each moment of our lives is a gift from God as well as being an ever-new invitation to fill with meaning both our days and our journey through this life.

We are called to learn how to tell the essential from the useless, to separate that which is precious from that which is worthless. We need constantly to turn our eyes towards the goal, then we will more and more become people of prayer, of hope and of peace, bearing blessings for everyone whom we may meet.

The Sisters of Brestovsko
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...in the Federation of St. Clare, Mexico

Our Ongoing Formation courses during the 8th Centenary of the canticle, *Audite Poverelle*

Peace and All Good.

Dear Sisters and Brothers of this special cTc magazine, it is with great joy that we share something of what we have experienced during our formation meetings, which were held during this year of grace marking the centenary of *Audite Poverelle*.

The central theme of the activities of the Federation during this year of grace was the beautiful canticle that our Father Francis wrote to Mother Clare, which is a priceless gift for us. In addition to being an opportunity to revitalise our spirituality and charism, our study of and reflection on this canticle immerses us in the loving depths of our founders, in our special charism.

We organised a Conference on Clarean spirituality, with themes were taken from *Audite Poverelle*.

Albeit virtually, we had the honour of meeting Br. Fábio Cesar Gomes, ofm, Delegate Pro Monialibus, in a very fraternal and warm encounter. Besides opening the Conference, he also gave us a presentation on the structure and content of the Canticle.

The chart below indicates the days





and themes that were presented by several of our friars from the Province of St. Peter and Paul (Michoacán).

OPENING OF THE CONFERENCE

Greetings, introductions, and opening remarks.

Speaker: Br. Fábio Cesar Gomes, ofm. (via zoom)

LISTEN, LITTLE POOR ONES... - Our vocational call.

My present experience of life.

Speaker: Br. Raymundo Castillo C., ofm.

LIVE ALWAYS IN TRUTH, THAT YOU MAY DIE IN OBEDIENCE,

Look daily into the mirror of eternity, Jesus Christ.

Speaker: Br. Javier Martínez R., ofm. (via zoom)

DO NOT LOOK AT THE LIFE WITHOUT, FOR THAT OF THE SPIRIT IS BETTER - Prayer and contemplation.

Communications media, challenges in today's world).

Speaker: Br. Flavio Chávez G., ofm.

I BEG YOU OUT OF GREAT LOVE, TO USE WITH DISCERNMENT THE ALMS THE LORD GIVES YOU.

Work, alms and benefactors.

Speaker: Br. Álvaro Rodríguez, ofm.

THOSE WEIGHED DOWN BY SICKNESS AND THE OTHERS 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 WILL BE CROWNED QUEEN IN HEAVEN WITH THE VIRGIN MARY.

Speaker: Br. Martin Arriaga T., ofm.

Each day of the week, we reflected on the theme and after that reflection, we formed groups in which we shared and responded to an *instrumentum laboris* that was provided. It included questions for the groups referring to each day's presentation, then leading into plenary sessions.

The sisters' participation was active, dynamic and enriching and the themes were enriching. The week also inclu-



ded periods of prayer and recreation.

It is worth mentioning that, in the second phase of the Conference, sisters from a separate Mexican Federation joined us (in Mexico there are three Poor Clare Federations). This was a very fraternal experience, as we

have rarely had the opportunity to have any shared activities and this Conference was an opportunity to get together.

The themes from 'Listen, poor little ones' allowed us to reflect on our own vocational call and the actual living out of it. In addition, we reflected on the experience of 'living in truth and dying in obedience' - living the truth and dying obediently. Our Lord Jesus Christ himself is our teacher in this and it was the foundation of the lives of our Father Francis and Mother Clare.

'Do not look at the life without, for that of the Spirit is better'... this is a challenge for us in a world in which we are constantly besieged by technology and media - the outside world has entered our monasteries. How can we know how to enter this world, without being of the world? This is a major task and challenge for today.

'Use with discernment the alms the Lord gives you'... the issues of paid work, benefactors, and alms need to be faced while we continue to live 'sine proprio' which is a fundamental aspect of our way of life.

'Those weighed down by sickness and the others wearied because of them'... this is a reality that afflicts us today. How do





we continue to be supportive when faced with old age, sickness, our reduced numbers, and the fatigue of those who carry the struggling members of the Church.

These themes of reflection were an insistent call to look at and revitalise our way of life today, and to realise that our way of life continues to be relevant and life-giving. Today, we can respond to the challenges of the world and continue to be a living memory of the Giver of all Good, who always watches over his children with love, when they are tired and weary. With his help, we can continue to sustain the wavering members of his mystical body and like our Mother Clare, at the end we can say: Thank you, Lord, for having created me...

With a fraternal embrace from the Poor Clare Sisters of the Federation of St. Clare of Mexico.

Sr. Patricia Bravo Torres, osc
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...to Ciudad Darío, Nicaragua

Our monastery was founded in 1977, by Sisters coming from the Proto-monastery of St. Clare in Assisi, Italy.

Since that time, by the grace of God, we have made four foundations, that last of which has been in the city of Chinandega, here in Nicaragua.

In 2006, we received the request from the Bishop of the city of Jinotega, to make a foundation in this Diocese; simultaneously we received another request to make a foundation in the city of Chinandega. After a period of prayer and discernment and the arrival, like a sign from the Lord, of many vocations to our monastery, on December 8 the Conventual Chapter unanimously decided to approve the foundation in the city of Chinandega. We then began preparing the documents to request from Rome, through the Sacred Congregation, the approval of the new foundation of the monastery.



On June 12, 2007 we received the approval from CICALSAL. Then on September 8, 2007, we celebrated the special Mass for the sending of the four Sisters who would be part of the new foundation. Many moments of great emotional intensity were experienced at this time.

On September 17, 2007 came the day so eagerly anticipated, of the parting of our Sisters. It was 6:00 in the morning when our young and courageous



missionaries found themselves on their knees requesting the blessing of Mother Clara Daniela Desidera, osc, and then, amid joy, tears and words of encouragement, gave their last embrace to the Sisters of this monastery.

Now we will step aside and hear from our Sisters as they share their missionary experience:

“At the hour of our departure our hearts were experiencing mixed emotions; however, something else was pushing us forward: the desire that the Reign of God be extended and announced through our silent lives. We thus left with heart in hand, but with hopes that were very high.

We were received with much joy with a Solemn Mass in which the Bishop of Matagalpa, who at that time was Msgr. Jorge Solorzano, was present. He came to leave us at the Diocese where we were received by Msgr. Bosco Vivas Robelos, accompanied by many priests and many faithful, especially the Third Order Franciscans and YOUFRA (Young Franciscans). At sunset the Bishop took us to the

Image of the Virgin of the Throne, the National Patroness, and here we renewed our Consecration to the Blessed Virgin Mary and placed in her hands the foundation of our monastery. Then we went to the little house where we would be staying during the construction... and after getting to work, cleaning and arranging, at 6:00 pm the little chapel was ready. Fr. Francisco Solorzano brought the Blessed Sacrament and with Him we felt complete and happy for the mission





to begin. The first night in Chinandega was like being on Mount Sinai, with thunder and streaks and flashes of lightning, a thoroughly unique experience.

The Lord in his Providence had given us the land through the generosity of many people. It seemed to us it would become the Promised land, in that it was volcanic land, which is extremely fertile; approximately 1 km away was the highest volcano in Nicaragua, St. Christopher Volcano, from which we beheld a very beautiful view. In addition, in this area of the country was also found the volcano Chonco, the little house, and the Volcano of water St. Clare. We also adapted, with a spirit of reparation, to the warm climate, which sometimes reached as high as 40 degrees Celsius (= 104 degrees Fahrenheit); we are after all very close to the sea, only 60 km away.

And so, trusting in Divine Providence which has never abandoned us, on January 28, 2008, came the Blessing of the First Stone, with a Holy Mass. It was a Solemn moment, taking place under Pontifical approval, being reported in the local paper, and with relics of Saints and the names of the Foundresses; in faith we were certain that God would build his House and abide therein. On March 17, the construction work officially began; meanwhile the little house had been transformed into a Monastery, with daily Mass, the faithful praying of the Liturgy of the Hours and Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament.

On January 6, 2009, after a year and a half of living in the house that had been loaned to us, we moved to another location closer to the construction site.

On May 1 of the same year, after almost two years filled with joy, trials, love and sorrows lived with hope placed in the Lord, the moment so long awaited arrived, to move into the Monastery. Fr. Francisco blessed it, even though only the first part - the cloister wall, Choir, Dormitory and Refectory - had been finished; with this we began our venture. On July 25, 2009, our Mother Monastery sent two postulants who had wanted to come to the foundation, and



on August 2 the first Vocation from this region entered; we give infinite thanks to the Lord for this blessing.

On November 26, 2010, our bishop Msgr. Bosco Vivas (+) formally blessed the Chapel and the altars during a Solemn Eucharistic Celebration, by pure providence, attributed to the intercession of St. Joseph.

With great gratitude to the Father of Mercies we have happily contemplated the conclusion of the Work which the Good God began three years ago, and so on December 12, 2010, with great joy the postulants and novices moved into their dormitory which was now ready. And on top of all this, the Lord gave us the gift of celebrating 25 years of Religious Profession of our Sister in charge, Sr. Clara Gabriela Pereira, on December 29 of the same year.

In summary, during these years we have strongly felt the mercy of God who has accomplished these great works through such small instruments, in order to make it clear that the work is of Him, such incredible demonstrations of Love and Providence, to which we can only continue to abandon ourselves. Vocations have come, sisters who have been professed and through grace and power have become part of and serve in our Federation, doing so in an especially welcoming manner these years to our sisters of the Federation in the Federal Assemblies and courses of Formation.

With great joy, on September 26, 2024, we received the official document approving the Canonical Erection of our Monastery.

On October 23, our Bishop Msgr. Sócrate Rene Sándigo canonically erected the monastery in a Solemn Mass, with the presence of our priests, our Father Provincial Fr. Edgardo Perez Tejeira, ofm, Brothers of the Province and the Mother of the Founding Monastery accompanied by her discretorium and extern sisters, as well as some sisters from other monasteries. It was a beautiful experience of unity, closeness and communion... three days after we held our first Chapter of Elections.”



Such is the narrative as told by our sisters.

We, as the founding monastery, are grateful to the Father of Mercies for his Providential Love, and we raise our souls in an exultant 'Te Deum'. We continue to hold them in our prayers, that God will continue to help them with his Grace as he has done until now, in this new stage of life that they begin.

The Sisters of Ciudad Darío
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We received

Clare and the Stigmata of Francis

Antonianum, 24 August 2024

In view of Francis' importance to Clare, both personally and in her vocational development, it is always surprising to realise how little she says about him in her writings. Most surprising of all is that she says nothing at all directly about the stigmata. She leaves us to guess or imagine her thoughts and reactions but, at first glance, her complete silence is surprising although - as we shall see - it may not be quite as it looks.

Another factor which always colours our thinking is the way in which, over the centuries, theology and devotion have tended to swing between stressing the humanity and stressing the divinity of Christ. We know that the thirteenth century was marked by a rediscovery of the immanent and incarnate God, who came and dwelt among us. We also know that Francis and Franciscan preaching made a major contribution to this shift of stress, both in preaching, in theology and in devotion. This is most noticeable in the change in the mood of art. We see a major change of mood as well as of style and subject material and, without getting lost in a history of western art, we can truly say that the life and preaching of Francis, and still more the extraordinary drama of his stigmata, gave great energy to these movements. It generated a shift in emphasis in the thirteenth century which prepared the ground for a later refocussing on the Incarnation.

Much of this development, this ideological and artistic shift, was accelerated by that most extraordinary event which we call the Stigmata of Francis. As far as we know, this was the first time in history that such a thing as stigmata had happened and the sources show us clearly that Francis' contemporaries found even the idea of such a thing was



hard to accept. At the very least, it took their thinking about the Incarnation into wholly untrampled territory. As Dostoevsky says, it is very hard for humanity to take in a new idea!

The reactions of those early Franciscans are important, obviously, partly because it affects their importance as witnesses and partly because much of our own understanding and acceptance of that extraordinary event is coloured by their reactions. Of course, there were those who doubted and in the beginning, they were a huge majority. There seems to have been both great doubt and great interest and we know that finally Gregory IX even had to issue a papal decree stating that the stigmata had certainly happened and the wonder was real, so we can be sure that there had been a fair amount of doubt and questioning. People hardly knew how to think let alone how to speak about it. A completely new idea demands expression in a new language. This is emphasised by the unexpected fact that in the very glowing and lyrical Decree of canonisation of Francis, Gregory makes no mention of the Stigmata.¹ This seems very surprising to us today but is possibly an indication of how hard it was for this wholly new idea to be grasped and understood. By canonising Francis, Gregory wanted to express his great love and admiration for an outstanding figure in church life at the time, but he also had his own agenda. He wanted to have the friars on his side, working with him in his agenda for church reform but at the same time, he did not want to be sidetracked by a discussion about something as new and extraordinary and open to doubt and disbelief as the stigmata. On the other hand, he had a great love and veneration for Francis. The Fioretti, sometimes stronger on devotion than on history, tells us very specifically about the way Francis changed Gregory's mind. We read:

«Pope Gregory, having some little doubt, as he afterwards related, concerning the wound in the side of St. Francis, the saint one night appeared to him and, raising his right arm a little, discovered to him the wound in his side. He then bade him bring a flask and place it



beneath the wound, and when the Pope had done so he saw it filled to the brim with blood mingled with water which flowed from the wound, and thereupon all doubt immediately departed from him.»²

As well as Gregory IX, the brothers are our main witnesses, especially Leo, Rufino and Elias and it is worth noting here that all those brothers were close friends of Clare's. We can be sure that they shared information and details with her and most probably pondered with her about the meaning of the events. As time went on, others saw the wounds for themselves, especially after Francis' death, and we know that in the Chapel of the Stigmata in La Verna, Clare is listed among those who were witnesses to the reality of the wounds. Within forty years of Francis' death, by 1263, a chapel had been built at La Verna over the place where it was believed to have happened and about then we have what is probably the best known account from Bonaventure³. This all adds to our surprise that, as far as we know, she said nothing about this astonishing event.

I think Clare's attitudes were established very early on. She joined the brothers in 1212 with, it seems, complete clarity and trust about her calling, and almost complete ignorance about most of the details about what was to come next. Once she and Francis had planned her part in the Palm Sunday liturgy, she had waited quietly and simply for events to unroll. She was like a sponge, soaking up every lesson that came from God. In her *Third Letter to Agnes* she defines the paradox which defined her life which was one of following: «such a Son as the heavens cannot contain, and yet she (his mother) received him into the small confines of her holy womb, and held him on her young girl's lap.»⁴

When she had first gone to San Damiano, the chapel there was dominated by the work we know as the San Damiano crucifix. What this icon was doing in a half ruined chapel beside the highway is an unsolved mystery. The figure shows



a triumphant and peaceful Christ surrounded by various figures who all share in this same peace. It was from this icon that Francis had that experience of the Crucified calling him to 'Repair my church, which as you can see, is falling into ruin' and, as we know, this began a chain reaction which still echoes among us. It defines the Franciscan vocation of us all. Clare went there in 1212 and lived there for forty years until her death in 1253. For all that time she would have prayed before that crucifix. We also know that during those years, as the Church reflected on the incarnation from fresh angles, one expression of these new reflections can be seen in the new style of crucifix which hangs today in Santa Chiara in Assisi. Although that work of art is a bit later than Clare and was commissioned by her successor as abbess, it was certainly influenced by the spirituality which she helped to develop.

Clare herself was also, as we have said, one of the witnesses of the stigmata, one of those who actually saw the wounds during Francis' lifetime. Tradition tells us that while he was staying at San Damiano she made him soft moccasins or slippers of rabbit fur to wear and a pair of these can still be seen in the reliquary at Santa Chiara. It is hard even to imagine what might have been the spiritual and emotional effect on Clare of actually seeing these wounds and hearing from Francis himself even the very little which he was able to say. Perhaps one of the underlying questions of today's talk is about whether we are left entirely to imagine the effect on Clare or whether she did, in fact, say anything about the Stigmata. Surely, we feel, it must have coloured her thinking and writing, but if so, it was not in clear twentieth-century style words.

Celano tells us that when some of them saw the wounds after Francis' death, the friars were literally unable to believe their eyes. He says: «For they had never heard or read in Scripture about what their eyes could see; they could not have been persuaded to believe it if it were not demonstrated by such clear evidence. [...] It seemed he had just been



taken down from the cross, his hands and feet pierced by nails and his right side wounded by a lance.»⁵

In trying to discern the impact of this on Clare, there are two extremes to avoid. One is to assume that because she said so little, she continued in her life along much the same lines as before. Humanly speaking this seems unlikely. Any thinking person would surely ask themselves profound questions about what all this might mean and what was the message God was giving them all? The other extreme is to read everything about her from 1224 as somehow reshuffled and radically altered in the light of the Stigmata.

I suggest that in a way both are true and in another way both are wrong! Neither really explains why Clare said, as far as we know, nothing at all about the stigmata. Her reaction was silence, but that does not mean she had no reaction or no thoughts about it. We live in an age where prominent people make statements about almost everything, whether they know about it or not, but Clare had no press to contend with and was able to come to terms with events in her own time. I suggest that she made the same journey of realisation and understanding that the other close friends of Francis had been making. We know she was close to all the group of Francis' brothers who had been present as the stricken Francis had left La Verna for the last time. They had then slowly travelled back together to the Porziuncola. We can be sure that Clare heard every detail of that emotional departure as it is given to us in the letter of Brother Masseo. At that time, Clare was about thirty years old, so by the time she wrote to Agnes, the Stigmata must have been part of her thinking and praying for a number of years. It is clear from Celano that in spite of Francis' own extreme reticence, the wounds imprinted on him were widely discussed.

That same group of friends had continued to travel with Francis for the next two years. During 1224-1225 his eye sight deteriorated rapidly until he was nearly blind, a condition which was, to modern thinking, only made worse by the eye treatment he was given. Riding Count Orlando's little



donkey, Francis - in spite of his physical condition - came from La Verna and went on a preaching tour through Umbria and the Marches of Ancona. One of the most mysterious and interesting aspects of the Stigmata, to my mind, is the immense apostolic urgency which it unleashed in Francis. It seems as if the revelation and grace of the Stigmata, though so punishing to his body, were pouring out of him spiritually so that he could not keep them to himself. Finally, as we know, he became too ill to continue and Brother Elias insisted that he spent an extended time at San Damiano during which he wrote, or continued to write, the Canticle of Creation. During that time, Clare and her sisters cared for him even though Clare herself was very ill. This of course is the time when Clare would have seen most of Francis and seen the Stigmata too. This is why she is listed at La Verna as a witness.

After this, the moment for words seems to have been over, though there was a continual buzz of rumour and guesswork among the Franciscans of the time. Francis himself rebuffed curiosity though he could not hide the suffering or the difficulties the Stigmata gave him in his daily life. He was effectively an invalid for whom all practical activities had now become immensely difficult. In addition he suffered intense spiritual turmoil, if not trauma. We do not know enough even to speculate about what went on in his heart and mind during those last two painful years but we can imagine just how Clare too must have struggled to understand and to integrate what she was learning and observing.

(to be continued)

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¹ *Mira circa nos*, 1228

² The earliest extant manuscript of the *Fioretti* is dated 1390

³ Bonaventure, *Legenda Minor* 6

⁴ 3Ag 18,19

⁵ 1 *Celano*, Second Book, Ch IX, 112



Isabella of France, Sister of St. Louis

P. Pietro Messa, ofm informed us about the publication of the book Isabella di Francia sorella di san Luigi, Fonti e documenti sulla fondatrice delle Sorelle minori, Padova 2023, «necessary to know Clare of Assisi and her posterity. This book was the subject of a study meeting at the Pontifical Antonianum University on 19 March 2024».

From the excerpt of Antonianum XCIX (2024) 405-407, we publish the speech at that meeting by Chiara Codazzi.

MARCO BARTOLI - JACQUES DALARUN - SEAN L. FIELD, *Isabella di Francia sorella di san Luigi; Fonti e documenti sulla fondatrice delle Sorelle minori*, (Franciscalia 3) Editrici Francescane, Padova 2023, pp. 306¹

The presentation of this volume: *Isabella of France, sister of St. Louis. Sources and Documents for the Foundress of the Lesser Sisters* (Sorores Minores), printed by Editrici Francescane 2023, is an important event. It means that we can pause a while on a page which has been too little frequented by Franciscan studies, that of Franciscan women. Above all it shows us a figure who is almost unknown and who has been almost unpublished, even though she was born 800 years ago.

Isabella of France, daughter of Louis VIII, King of France and of Blanche of Castille, was born in March 1225 and died in February 1270. The sister of the holy King Louis IX, from childhood she was frequently promised in marriage to Charles of Anjou, then King of Sicily. Until about 1240, with «extraordinary determination» (Introduction, p. 33), she resi-



sted all family pressures and refused to marry Corrado, son of the Emperor Frederic II. She lived at court but from that moment on, while remaining a lay woman, she dedicated herself to a life of prayer, giving great attention to poverty and embracing the life of religious virginity. In fact, without ever being a religious herself, she founded an Order for women in France, that of the Minoresses, the very name of which captures her vision of Franciscan life for women as a parallel to that of the Friars Minor. This latter title was not entirely well received, perhaps because of the symbolic burden which it carried in itself and the fear that it would work to the discredit of the Order. By the wish of the pope, the adjective 'recluse' was added to their title.

The first monastery was that of Longchamp and its official title was the Monastery of the Sisters of the Order of the humble Servants of the blessed and glorious Virgin Mary. Isabella wrote a Rule for this monastery, with the support and help of several Friars Minor, including some important Masters of Franciscan Theology from Paris. These included men like Bonaventure of Bagnoregio who later became Minister General of the Order in 1257. The Rule was approved by Alexander IV in 1259, in spite of the prohibition of the recent IV Lateran Council and was approved in 1263 by Urban IV.

Unlike other Franciscan women from royal backgrounds - we think of Elisabeth of Hungary and Agnes of Prague, princesses of Central Europe, who were recognised immediately as national heroines for their holiness and who were canonised almost immediately after their death - Isabella only received the title of Blessed from Pope Leo X in 1521, some three centuries after her death. A biography was written in 1283 - *The Life of Blessed Isabella of France* - by another woman, Agnes of Harcourt, and published in the volume under review (cf. p. 255-295). In this work, we are confronted by a unique hagiographical composition of the XII century, a life of a woman written by another woman. It was written directly in French without going through any Latin ver-



sions. Historians have shown little interest in this saint. In XVII century there were some texts published about her, many of which are still unedited. Until 1955 any literature about her was largely devotional. It was only about twenty years ago, in France and in the United States, that there was any awakening of interest which has intensified particularly in the last ten years.

The volume has three parts. In the Preface (pp. 7-24) Jacques Delarun contextualises the sources and studies about Isabella of France, highlighting the uniqueness and significance of this new volume. Then follows the Introduction by Sean Linscott Field, (pp 25-85) - himself a great specialist in the field of Capetian saints - who presents a true and well-documented biography, while also paying attention to other texts about her. The last part of the volume, Sources (pp 87-295) edited by Sean Field and Jacques Delarun, collects 41 texts relevant to Isabella, as in an anthology, each of which is preceded by an Introduction giving salient facts about the document, the manuscript tradition and the editions. The Italian translation throughout is the work of Marco Bartoli, as much for the French as for the Latin texts (cf pp. 23-23).

The presentation of this beautiful work, including through the voices of the authors, is a precious moment as much for its content as for the reflections which emerge from meeting this remarkable woman. A number of important questions emerge, in fact, from the pages of this work. First of all, with regard to the transmission of the memory of Isabella of France, what has been the image people had of her and why has history ignored her for centuries? An equal number of questions arise from any consideration of Isabella in connection with other feminine figures of Franciscan origin. There are also, of course, inevitable questions about the connection between the Rule and Form of Life of Clare of Assisi and that of the Sisters Minor of Isabella as well as



questions about the kind of relationship there might be between those two feminine realities. On the other hand, the relationship between Isabella of France, the Sister Minor and the Franciscan men attracts considerable attention, as well as any interaction between her and the Franciscans, and the Capetian royal family and the papacy. There are great hopes that the forthcoming eighth anniversary of her death, to be celebrated in 2025, can bring these strands together and lead to the development of further studies, and a further deepening understanding of this woman.

Chiara Codazzi

¹ The contributions of Professor Chiara Codazzi, Marco Bartoli, Gabriella Zarri, Jacques Dalarun e Sean L. Field at the Study Meeting promoted by the Franciscan Institute of of Spirituality, at the Pontifical University Antonianum, held on 19 March 2014, on the occasion of the publication of the book: *Isabella of France, Sister of St. Louis*.

News from the Office Pro Monialibus

Federation “Maria Assunta” of the Poor Clares of Apulia (Italy)

The Ordinary Assembly of the Federation “Maria Assunta” of the Poor Clares of Apulia, Italy, on October 10, 2024, chaired by the Federal Assistant, Br. Michele Carriero, ofm, has canonically elected:

as Mother President:

M. Chiara Angelica De Marco - Monastery of Mola di Bari
as Councillors:

Sr. Maria Lucia Preziosa - Monastery of Bisceglie

Sr. Chiara Veronica Guidone - Monastery of Nardò

Sr. Maria Letizia Maggi - Monastery of Manduria

Sr. Sonia Giustizieri - Monastery of Scutari.

I also communicate that:

- the new Federal Secretary is M. Veronica Romagnoli of the Capuchines Monastery of Alessano, which is federated with our Federation;

- the new email addresses of the Federation are:

Mother President: fed.clarissepuglia@gmail.com

Federal Secretary: segr.clarissepuglia@gmail.com

In communion of prayer,

Sr. Maria Letizia Maggi, osc

**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!**

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