



# The Minister General

## Letter for the Solemnity of St. Clare, 2024



*“True love of Christ transformed  
the lover into His image”  
LMj, XIII, 5*

Dear Sisters,

*May the Lord give you peace!*

This year, the Feast of our Mother St. Clare occurs during the Eighth Centenary of the Stigmata of St Francis — the culmination of his path of following the poor and crucified Christ. I have pondered at length about how this event in the life of Francis resonates in Clare’s human and spiritual experience. The link is their individual relationship with the Lord Jesus. For Francis, the mysterious encounter at La Verna can be seen as a blazing coal that prepared him to become conformed to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in his encounter with “Sister Death.” For Clare, instead, the encounter with “her” Lord was the *raison d’être* of her entire existence as a woman, expressed in the sign of her total belonging to Him.

I would like to offer you a few reflections which I hope will be useful in deepening your charism. I also draw from the teaching of the Seraphic Doctor, Saint Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, the 750th anniversary of whose death falls this year.

## 1. The context of the Stigmata in 1224

The hagiographical sources tell us that Francis of Assisi, after an intense period and at a time of “great temptation”, withdrew to La Verna for a *Lent* of fasting and prayer, as was his custom. It was precisely in this **context of silence and prayer** that he received a mysterious visit. On La Verna, the profound desire of the Poverello to follow Christ and to be conformed totally to Him is fulfilled in the encounter with the Crucified One. “Following in the footsteps” of Christ reaches its climax here, under the impetus of the “fervour of charity” that inflamed “the Bridegroom’s friend.” In creatures, Francis finds the footsteps of the Beloved, “out of them all making for himself a ladder through which he could climb up to lay hold of Him who is *utterly desirable*.” The quotation from the Song of Songs 5:16 demonstrates the vigour of a language of love with a spousal slant, made even more evident in this other passage with its reference to Sg 1:12:

“Jesus Christ crucified always rested like a *bundle of myrrh in the bosom of his soul*, into Whom he longed to be totally transformed through an enkindling of ecstatic love.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Major Legend (LMj), IX,1.

<sup>2</sup> LMj, IX, 2; cfr. LC1 30.

This longing was fulfilled in the gift of the Stigmata, for “true love of Christ transformed the lover into His image.”<sup>3</sup>

**The encounter with the Beloved becomes a song of praise** — consequently, Francis, following his encounter with the Crucified, composes the *Praises of God*. This is a prayer that springs from a heart that is in love, entirely centred in the divine You: “You are the holy Lord God Who does wonderful things. You are strong. You are great. You are the most high.”<sup>4</sup>

Clare’s life with her sisters was immersed in silence, which safeguarded her following of Christ, whom she recognised as the “Poor Crucified” to be served “with a passionate desire.”<sup>5</sup> Clare’s prayer was nourished by this interior “vision”, maturing in the praise and joy of contemplating Christ, the Bridegroom of those who have chosen to follow him.

We can say, then, that throughout her life Clare lived out the same *sequela Christi* that led the Poverello to receive the gift of the Stigmata in that loving and painful encounter with the poor and glorious Christ. It is here, I believe, that her experience corresponds with that of Francis in a unique way. Of course, this correlation remains mysterious, and we can only try to intuit it from their writings.

However, one fact remains; after the Stigmata, Francis stayed for a long time at San Damiano, and certainly was cared for by Clare and her sisters. Both of them were very reserved, as we know, but at the same time, we can imagine that something of the love and pain that her brother was experiencing was communicated to Clare. The Canticle of the Creatures that emerged precisely at that time is an echo and an unforgettable sign of that love. Let me attempt to tune in to these resonances, that perhaps are infrequently accessed, but are very profound.

## **2. Following in the footsteps of the poor and humble Christ and the Bridegroom**

The theme of following in the footsteps of Christ is central in Francis and Clare, so much so that it is recognised as a foundational to our spirituality. The two of them have emphases that are in union but also have differences. The testimony of Bona di Guelfuccio, the 17th witness in Clare’s canonisation process, says that Francis “always preached to her about converting to Jesus Christ.”<sup>6</sup> This “conversion” means the turning of one’s whole person towards someone who attracts — the Bridegroom.

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<sup>3</sup> LMj, XIII, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Praises of God, 1 & 2.

<sup>5</sup> 1Letter to Agnes (1LAg), 13.

<sup>6</sup> Process of canonization, 17th witness, 3.

The call is to follow Christ, the poor Bridegroom, as Clare reminds Agnes: “because you have despised the splendour of an earthly kingdom and considered of little value the offers of an imperial marriage. Instead, as someone zealous for the holiest poverty, in a spirit of great humility and the most ardent love, you have held fast to the footprints of Him to Whom you merited to be joined in marriage.”<sup>7</sup>

Truly following in the footsteps of the poor Christ orients one to a deep, spousal communion:

“by humility, the virtue of faith, and the arms of poverty, you have taken hold of that incomparable treasure hidden in the field of the world and of the human heart, with which you have purchased that by Whom all things have been made from nothing.”<sup>8</sup>

The Gospel theme of the treasure in the field is embraced by Agnes with humility, faith and poverty, in a growing movement of adherence to the One whom she confesses as Lord. Agnes is invited by Clare to “be strengthened in the holy service of the Poor Crucified.”<sup>9</sup> Following in his footsteps becomes a service of love, animated by the desire that moves Agnes in her entire person, and who for this reason is “worthy to be called a sister, spouse and mother of the Son of the Most High Father and of the glorious Virgin.”<sup>10</sup> The resonance of these attributes is profound and outlines a Christian path of discipleship and union with Christ.

Agnes’ generous response allows Clare to exclaim with jubilation:

“I sigh with so much more exultation in the Lord as I have known and believe that you supply most wonderfully what is lacking both in me and in the other sisters in following the footprints of the poor and humble Jesus Christ.”<sup>11</sup>

The *sequela Christi* is a gift and commitment that touches and enriches everyone in the community, because goodness circulates and makes one grow in love and in vital communion with Christ:

“So, you too, by following in her footprints, especially [those] of humility and poverty, can, without any doubt, always carry Him spiritually in your chaste and virginal body.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> 2Lag, 6 & 7.

<sup>8</sup> 3LAg7.

<sup>9</sup> 1LAg 13b.

<sup>10</sup> 1LAg 24.

<sup>11</sup> 3LAg 4.

<sup>12</sup> 3LAg 25.

The sequela and poverty unite in a spousal experience of love and communion with the One “Who endured the suffering of the cross for us all.”<sup>13</sup>

The exquisitely spousal attribute of loving union with the Lord Jesus, which pervades Clare’s thoughts and letters, is already made clear in the first letter to Agnes, with the assurance, made to her and to all her present and future sisters, that the divine Bridegroom, the Lord Jesus — the most noble bridegroom of all — “will keep Your virginity ever unspotted and unsullied, the Lord Jesus Christ, Whom in loving, You are chaste; in touching, You become more pure; in embracing, You are a virgin.”<sup>14</sup>

Echoed in these words is a reference to the office of the virgin and martyr Saint Agnes. In one of the two sermons dedicated by Bonaventure to this saint, the same eulogy addressed by Clare to Agnes is seen. In place of her earthly nuptials, the martyr preferred union with the Lord Jesus. In doing so, she demonstrated all her virginal beauty, praised in the words of Sg 4:7:

“*You are altogether beautiful, my friend; there is no blemish in you.*’ The second part explains the first; for she was without blemish, therefore she was a friend. [...] Those who are chaste in flesh, in heart, in imagination and in outward conduct are unblemished. Chastity is a great virtue. The eternal bridegroom can love none but the chaste soul. Not without reason do the Seraphim cry out: *Holy, holy, holy*. They do not cry out “great”, “wise” or “just”. Why is it the Seraphim who cry out *holy, holy* rather than the other angels? Dionysius says that holy is the same as pure.” And the sermon concludes with a very incisive phrase; “The union of Christ and Agnes is the union of bridegroom and bride.”<sup>15</sup>

The attentive contemplation of the mystery of the cross is transformed into a loving embrace with the Crucified Beloved, which leads one to immerse oneself ever more in his saving wounds, in his heart pierced by love and out of love. In this sense, a passage from the spiritual pamphlet *De perfectione vitae - Ad sorores* is instructive, in which Bonaventure exhorts the devout soul not to be content with a fleeting contact with the Saviour’s wounds and says:

“Enter wholly through the door of his side to the heart of Jesus himself. There being transformed into Christ by a most ardent love for the Crucified One, pierced by the nails of divine awe, pierced by the lance of a most heartfelt devotion, pierced by the sword of intimate compassion. Seek no other, yearn for no other, ask for no other consolation, except to die on the cross with Christ. Then he exclaims in the words of Paul the Apostle: *I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.*”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> 1LAg 14.

<sup>14</sup> 1LAg 7 & 8.

<sup>15</sup> Sermones de diversis. II. De sanctis. 37. De Sancta Agnete virgine et martyre, 10. 15: Opera San Bonaventura XII/2, p. 95. 101.

<sup>16</sup> VI, 2: Opera San Bonaventura XIII, p. 359.

In the distinctiveness of their respective paths, Francis and Clare placed “following in the footsteps” of Christ at the centre, by living without anything of their own. They do this in order to be in union with Crucified Love, the Spouse of the Church and of redeemed humanity — here the ecclesial value of Clare’s vocation is also brought to light.

It seems to me that here, through a prolonged contemplative gaze, we can find the point of contact between the mystery of the Stigmata of Francis and the path journeyed by Clare.

### 3. Clare supports Francis

In our parish church in Hong Kong, I’ve seen a stained-glass window depicting Clare holding the stigmatized Francis in a manner reminiscent of Mary cradling the body of the crucified Christ in the “Pieta.” This image made me wonder about how this event in Francis’ life resonated in Clare’s life and spiritual experience.



We see how Clare recognised the call to become “a co-worker of God Himself and a support for the weak members of His ineffable Body.”<sup>17</sup>

I like to think that Clare shared this experience with Francis, who had been made so weak by the mysterious marks imprinted on his frail body. I dare to think that the sister supported her brother in the Spirit, above all in carrying the burden of such a unique communion with the crucified Christ.

What would such a sign have asked of Francis and his faith relationship with the Lord? How would his prayer have matured as a result?

The Praises and the Canticle reveal some insights. What suffering did he experience in order to participate with Christ in the peace and reconciliation of all creatures? How can we not think that Clare, for her part, supported Francis with her understated presence and her prayer?

Would she have seen those mysterious signs only on the already lifeless body of the Poverello? Or might she have tended his wounds, at least through her burning desire, as she seems to allude to in the dream-vision of the breast? With great freedom of language, Clare recounts seeing herself climbing a high ladder, with the agility imparted by love, carrying the symbols of humble service — the jug, and the towel — to reach Francis at

<sup>17</sup> 3LAg 8.

the top of the ladder. Francis, now conformed to Christ, offers her his breast from which she is repeatedly invited to “Come, take, and drink.”<sup>18</sup> Francis receives compassion and maternal intercession from Clare, “the footprint of the Mother of God”<sup>19</sup>, but in a daring reciprocity, it is she who finds herself as a daughter in the position of receiving. How can we not glimpse in this a singular Franciscan “Pietà”?

I believe that Clare intuited Francis’ Paschal travail and participated in it. It is not by chance that her illness follows on these events. Could this also have been her way of supporting Francis and the fruits of the gift of love he received?

Dear sisters, I greet you as we commemorate the Stigmata, on which I have briefly tried to reflect with you, journeying to the heart of Clare’s experience. You yourselves can make this journey through the daily experience of *sequela*, in the spousal dimension of your vocation lived in the Church for the world. You too are told today: “See how Christ has united his bride to himself, and what food he gives us all to eat.”<sup>20</sup>

This is what motivates us to remember each other in the prayer of praise and intercession, to mutually safeguard each other in our Gospel lives, the true precious pearl that the Lord has entrusted to us in the Church for the good of the world.

I greet you with brotherly affection as I impart the Seraphic Blessing.

Fraternally,



*Fr. Massimo Fusarelli, OFM*

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Minister General*

St. Mary of the Angels,  
August 1st, 2024  
*Opening of the Assisi Pardon*

Prot. 113299/MG-40-2024

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<sup>18</sup> Process of Canonization, 3rd witness, 28.

<sup>19</sup> The Legend of St. Clare, Preface, 14.

<sup>20</sup> St. John Chrysostom, Catechesis 3, 19: cf. Office of Readings for Good Friday.