



Minister General's Letter for the Solemnity of St Clare

Assisi, 2 August 2023
Pardon of Assisi

Dear Sisters,
May the Lord give you peace!

The commemoration of Our Mother Saint Clare falls this year in the Eighth Centenary of the *Regula Bullata* and the Christmas of Greccio, a precious opportunity to emphasise three points: the inner bond between the Rules of Francis and that of Clare; the mystery of the Incarnation, which helps us to deepen the charism today, also thanks to the work of revising the Constitutions; the Centenary of the Canticle *Audite Poverelle*, written by Francis together with the Canticle of Creatures in 1225.

1. The Rule of Francis and Clare

The Rule of Francis and Clare have a common charismatic root, which refers back to the initial “formula vitae”, given by Francis to Clare and her first companions sometime after their arrival at San Damiano, as Clare herself recalls in her Testament and which she preserves as a radiant nucleus in



her Rule in Chapter VI. This is why the Rule of 1253 - twenty-seven years after the death of St Francis - refers back to and at the same time develops in an original way “the form of life and the way of holy unity and highest poverty that the blessed father Francis gave you in words and in writing to observe”¹ .

Underlying St Clare’s form of life “*in holy unity and highest poverty*” is her contemplative gaze upon the poverty of the Son of God. This is the living Gospel that Clare experiences in “losing her own life”² in the steps of Christ and his poor Mother. It is a step backwards with respect to oneself before a “gift” of grace that precedes us and is, as for Francis, “the grace of doing penance... living according to the perfection of the holy Gospel”³ .

The living space to welcome this grace is the “gift” of the sisters, in which no longer the individual but the entire community experiences that love that communicates and binds those born of God in a single life. The fruit of all the sisters’ unconditional acceptance of this gift that does not come from us but from God is to be cherished and lived in “preserving the unity of mutual love and peace”⁴ . The community then lives that mystery of charity in the larger breath of the Church, which remains the seal and permanent guarantee not to appropriate the gift received.

We are at the heart of that “divine inspiration” that leads those called to “embrace this life” rather than a series of precepts and behaviours. The Gospel is the rule that sets both Francis and Clare on the path, giving a new shape to their whole life, thanks to “having the Spirit of the Lord and his holy activity”⁵ . It is he who animates an ever-new journey, which holds together the Gospel and life, the Rule and daily choices, large and small,

The Spirit of the Lord is the strongest inner bond between the two Rules, and this centenary year allows us to deepen it.

2. The gift of the charism received and lived today

At Greccio, Francis wants to see with his own eyes the hardship and poverty in which the Son of God was born⁶ , who, for St Clare, *became the way*.⁷ Christmas at Greccio reminds us, on the one hand of the full humanity of Jesus and, on the other, of our human and historical dimension, in all their seriousness. Here we are at the heart of an incarnated spirituality that also helps us to enculturate our faith and our charisms. In the place of Greccio, Francis expressed the proclamation of the faith in

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- 1 *Rule of St. Clare (=RCh), 16*
 - 2 Mt 10:39.
 - 3 *RCh VI, 1.3.*
 - 4 *RCh IV, 22.*
 - 5 *Later Rule 10.8; RCh 10.9*
 - 6 *First Life of Thomas of Celano 30.84*
 - 7 *Testament of St Clare, 5.*

the language of the people, creating a new culture in which the faith was effectively expressed.

The mystery of Christmas that Francis celebrated in Greccio can guide you in the second stage of the process of revising your Constitutions, entitled “Consider”. It aims to deepen the charism in an incarnated way, that is, attentive to our personal, community and historical reality. It is the central stage which makes this journey of revision worthwhile. Today that the dimensions of your Order are spread across the various continents, with their wealth of languages and experiences, I believe it is vitally important to re-describe together the nucleus of the charism of the Poor Clares. The rediscovery of our origins and their sources, including the Rule and the other writings of Francis and Clare, has allowed us to grow over the past 60 years in the rediscovery and deepening of the charism.

At the same time, we are aware that today the Clarian charism has been welcomed and expressed in the world in many different sensitivities, none of which can think of expressing it completely and once and for all. The charism is a gift of the Spirit, received in an ever-new way in contact with life and different cultures.

Today we are asked to “hold together” the essentials of the charism, which all unite, along with the differences. We are at the heart of the Marian custody of the Word (words and history), which is the theological core of the *forma vitae* that Francis gave Clare as a restitution of what he had seen her and the first sisters live.

This scares us a little, but it is an important and necessary exercise to be disciples in this time: a unity that flattens is unrealistic, just as diversity at all costs, deliberately lacking a shared core is harmful.

This is particularly important today. Indeed, we run the risk of making an individual or community selection of some aspects of the charism, believing that they are no longer current or compatible with our mentality and this or that culture. There is also the risk of becoming rigid on other points, absolutising secondary elements with respect to the centre. These positions exist among the sisters in the world, and this is why I see how in the process of revising the Constitutions, it is vitally important to recognise together what lies at the heart of the charism and, in this light, to recognise and define together the lines to be able to live it in the changed conditions of our time⁸. It is still a matter of learning how to hold together

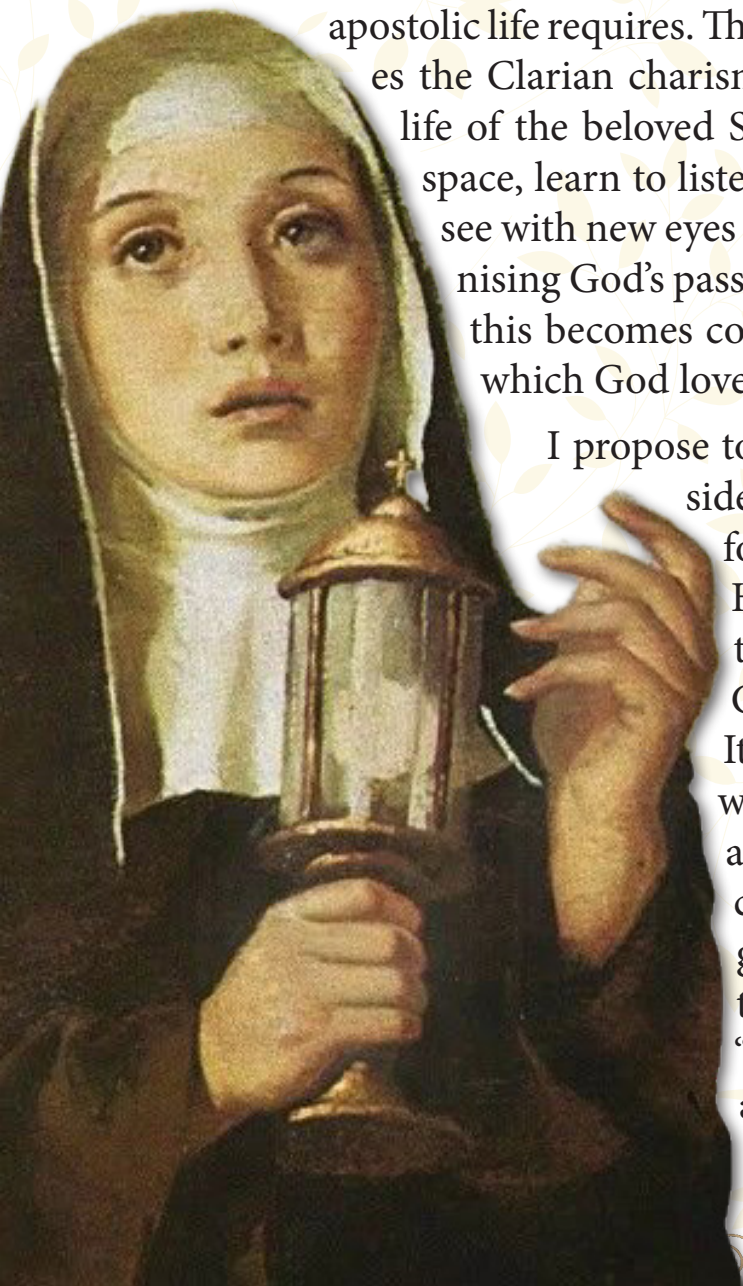


the charism, a gift that unites us because we do not invent it, and life, which is always multiform: by living the gift received in the charism, we better understand it in today's world, through a discernment exercised in three steps, already familiar to you:

- listening to the word of God, contained in the Scriptures and in personal, community and social life, listening refined by continuous prayer in an atmosphere of silence and progressive internalisation;
- fraternal life as the space for continuous conversion, to evaluate the choices made, in a path of ever more evangelical life review;
- the recognition of the choices to be dared in the simple and hidden life of each day as well as in the most important moments to translate the Gospel into life. In particular, today, it becomes necessary to work on the inculturation of the Clarian charism: I see several examples of this in my visits to the sisters worldwide, but there is still a long way to go.

You live all this in the voluntary and free choice to remain in a “reduced” space, even physically, renouncing the network of relationships and services that a type of apostolic life requires. This paradoxical and precious element expresses the Clarian charism in its adherence to the humble and poor life of the beloved Son and his poor Mother. In this “reduced” space, learn to listen, live in fraternal communion and learn to see with new eyes the reality in which we are immersed, recognising God's passage in the chiaroscuro of human choices. All this becomes continual intercession on behalf of the world, which God loves madly.

I propose to you these essential elements, which I consider vital in the work of the Constitutions, to follow the steps of the poor life of Christ and His Mother in the Church today, according to the characteristics of that reality that the Church calls “integrally contemplative” life. It is a life unified by prayerful listening to the word of God to remain industriously vigilant as we await the coming Kingdom and proclaim it with the humble strength of love that gives itself to the end. It is a prophecy that the pilgrim Church in the world needs, to “show” the face of God again to the women and men of our time, who, in different ways, thirst for it.



3. Listen, little poor ones called by the Lord

The third point to which I draw your attention this year is the preparation for the centenary of the canticle that St Francis composed and had performed “some holy words with chant for the greater consolation and edification of the Poor Ladies, realising how much his illness troubled them”.⁹

Francis, in 1225, having composed the Canticle of Brother Sun during his stay at San Damiano, gave the words of the *Audite poverelle* to Clare and the poor sisters of San Damiano, along with all those who would come after them.

I was very pleased to learn that in the issues of your international liaison magazine, you will be able to delve into the canticle as a whole and in its parts over two years. This seems to me a very timely initiative.

Francis composed it in the time following the Stigmata and precisely at San Damiano, where he suffered a great deal physically and at the same time experienced an intimate consolation of the Spirit, which seemed to come to him almost as the fruit of the sisters’ prayer and affection, which reached him even through the walls of the cloister that now separated him from them.

After Francis’ wounds at La Verna, Clare begins to fall ill. Perhaps she participates in a mysterious way in that passion of love and sorrow that he tried to stammer out in song.

We can retrace the last years of the Poverello’s life in the company of Clare and her sisters, from the Rule to Christmas at Greccio, from the Stigmata to the Canticle of Brother Sun and the *Audite Poverelle*, songs that open us up to the Easter of Francis but also to the echo that all this certainly had in the hearts of Clare and her sisters.

Audite, poverelle opens with the memory of your calling (*called by the Lord*) in the diversity of origins and cultures (*who have come together from many parts and provinces*)

The invitation is to *live always in truth*, free from the *snares*¹⁰ that bind the heart, so that we can live in the obedience of love, the heart of following the poor Christ.

Francis again invites the sisters to take care of their interiority (*Do not look at the life outside, for that of the Spirit is better*) for a true life capable of *discretion*, i.e. conducted in continuous spiritual discernment.

We seem to hear an echo of Francis’ physical sufferings in the invitation to endure in peace, that of the Beatitudes, the fatigue of illness. On this road, each sister *will be crowned queen in heaven with the Virgin Mary*, image of the Church.

Dear Sisters, I entrust these reflections to you as you prepare to experience the Transitus of Our Mother Saint Clare and her birth into heaven. May it be an op-

9 *Mirror of perfection*, 90.

10 *3 Letter to Agnes*, 15.

portunity to once again adhere to the covenant that the Lord established with us in Christ and confirmed for us with the Rule; an opportunity to gather around the essentials of the charism for this time and to make our own Francis' song of praise and blessing at a difficult time for him, just as the time we are passing through is challenging for us.

Let us remember one another in prayer of praise and intercession and cherish each other in living according to the Gospel, the true precious pearl that the Lord has entrusted to us in the Church for the good of the world.

With the Seraphic Blessing, I greet you with brotherly affection.



Fr. Massimo Fusarelli ofm

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