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**LOOK ALWAYS
TO YOUR
BEGINNING**



**Contemporary relevance
of the
Franciscan/Clarian Charism
after 800 years
of existence**

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Cover: St. Clare (cf. 4LCl), oil on canvas, Ivo Batocco

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GREETINGS, CONGRATULATIONS AND GRATITUDE

1. To all the Poor Sisters of Saint Clare and to all the Lesser Brothers; *“Health and holy Peace in the Lord”* (2LCus 1; cf. 5LCl 1)

We are about to close the 8th Centenary of the conversion/consecration of Sister Clare in the Portiuncula (1211/12) and the 8th Centenary of the Founding of the Order of the Poor Sisters. In this circumstance, so special for all of us who make up the Franciscan Family, I feel the need to send to you, my dear Sisters, my personal felicitations and those of all the Lesser Brothers.

With this letter I want to assure you that always, but especially during this Franciscan/Clarian Jubilee, we are united with you in giving thanks to the Lord who continues to preserve even today the charism that was given to Francis and Clare 800 years ago. At the same time I want to express to you my gratitude, and that of the Brothers, for your presence, of silence, prayer and deep affection, in our life, and in the life of the

Church and the world. You are a real treasure for all of us because, from your *life hidden with Christ* (cf Col 3,3), you evangelize us, reminding us that we are of the Lord and for the Lord, and only on this basis can we be for others.¹ Thank you, Sisters! Congratulations!

1 “The more one lives in Christ, the better one can serve him in others, going even to the furthest missionary outposts and facing the greatest dangers.” (VC 76).

I

TO BEGIN

2. During this time, we have received repeated invitations from different sources, not least from the Church herself,² to take seriously the invitation of Clare: *know your calling* (*TestCl* 4) and not to forget our beginning point, that is, our origins (*2LCI* 11). These calls aim at one primary objective: to take advantage of this time of grace, this *kairos*, to deepen our understanding of the Franciscan/Clarian Form of Life, *revisiting* the essential elements of this charism, which after 800 years continues to be very contemporary, as rightly affirmed by Benedict XVI: “*The time that separates us from the adventure of these two saints [Francis and Clare] has not diminished their fascination. Quite the contrary*”³

Francis and Clare, though children of their own time, speaking its language, thinking in its categories, attuned to its sensitivities, are also very contemporary. Francis

2 Cf. Benedict XVI, *The woman mirrored in the eyes of Francis* (= *MMOF*), Message of Benedict XVI on the occasion of the centenary of the conversion of Saint Clare, *L'Osservatore Romano*, 2 March 2012; cf. in *Acta Ordinis Fratrum Minorum*, An CXXXI, n. 1, 15-17.

3 *Idem*, en *Acta* 17.

and Clare are attuned to their times because they knew how to discover its deepest necessities, interpreting them as signs of the times, as calls of the Spirit, and proposed an incarnation of the Gospel that responded to them perfectly. This is what makes Francis and Clare, without being foreign to their own times, people whom we sense as contemporary. The secret of such a characteristic is obvious: "*Francis and Clare go back to the source of the living waters.*"⁴ Careful hearers of the Gospel, they keep it in their hearts (cf. *Lk 2, 51*), and promptly obey the Word (cf. *1Cel 22*), being transformed, in this way, internally and externally, into living icons of the Son, the eternal Word of the Father (cf. *3LCl 13*), into a "living exegesis" of the Gospel.⁵ Having encountered the Fountain of living water (cf. *Jn 4, 10 ff*), even after eight centuries streams of water continue to flow from them, quenching the thirst for fulness of so many of our contemporaries, and giving a response to so many existential questions of men and women today.

3. History, even with its indifference, questions all consecrated persons to give the reasons for their vocational choices, but in a special way poses this question to those who are contemplatives. And in this context of celebrating 800 years of their existence, it questions in a special way the Poor Sisters. Hence the urgency of *revisiting* with passion the values that constitute the essence of the Franciscan/Clarian charism, not only in order to look with gratitude to the past, in which the Spirit, with the generous collaboration of so many Poor Sisters and Lesser Brothers, has written a great history, one that we have the responsibility to transmit and recount, but also and above all, to live

4 M. Victoria Trivino, *Francisco de Asís y Clara*, PPC, Madrid, 2009, 27.

5 Benedict XVI, *VD*, 83.

the present with passion, embrace the future with hope and, in this way, to continue building a great history in the future.⁶

Celebrating a Jubilee, like that of the 800 years of the conversion/consecration of Clare and the founding of the Order of the Poor Sisters, is an occasion to thank *the Father of mercies* for the gift of Clare and the gift of the Poor Sisters. But it is also, and above all, a favorable time to take seriously *the grace of the origins*, to delight in an event that, having occurred some eight centuries ago, continues to be the foundation and principle from which a history and a future flow.

Only with this attitude will we be able to bring to completion with dedication the work we have begun well (cf. *5LCl* 14; *LtrOrd* 10), to maintain fidelity to the demands of the Franciscan/Clarian Form of Life (cf. *BICl* 15) and identify paths to be taken today, in such a way that we may be faithful to Christ, to the Church, and to the human person of today.⁷ You, my dear Poor Sisters, forming “a body of polished living stones” (*2Cel* 204) and open to the surprises of God, will be a cry of new life for our times, “example and mirror” to one another and to everyone (cf. *TestCl* 19).

In the context which is ours to live, all of this require readiness and docility, always new and creative, to the action of the Spirit. Only He can keep the freshness and authenticity of our origins, and at the same time, infuse the courage of creativity in order to respond better to the *signs of the times*.

4. With this letter to all the Poor Sisters, based on the responsibility that comes to me

6 Cf. *NMI*, 1; *Vita Consecrata* (=VC) 110.

7 Cf. VC 110).

from Francis himself (cf. *RCl* 6, 3-4), and also to all the Lesser Brothers, I wish to return to the basic elements of our common form of life,⁸ with special reference to Clare and her Sisters, with the intention not only that we should care for the Form of Life we have professed, but that we should also deepen and develop it,⁹ aware that in these basic elements we will find the significance of our being in the Church for the world.

Since the Form of Life of the Poor Sisters and Lesser Brothers *is the same*,¹⁰ and that the same Spirit brought forth from the world both the Brothers and the Sisters (cf. *2Cel* 204), with this letter I make a call to all to listen to Clare, the faithful interpreter in her life and her Writings, of the Form of Life revealed by the Most High to Francis (cf. *Test* 14). While I ask the Sisters to drink from the clear water of Clarian spirituality, I ask the Brothers to know Clare better, in order to love her even more. This will help us to live better the same Form of Life we have professed. Brothers and Sisters: we are two sides of the same coin. For this reason, we both have the responsibility to make the inspiration *to live according to the form of the*

8 I have reflected on this fundamental elements on various occasions, particularly in the letters I have written each year to the Poor Sisters for the Feast of Saint Clare, cf. José Rodríguez Carballo, ofm, *Conoce tu vocación. En diálogo con las Hermanas Clarisas*, [Know Your Vocation: In Dialogue with the Poor Clare Sisters] Roma 2012.

9 Cf. *CdC*, 20.

10 “It was beside this little church (San Damiano), which Francis restored after his conversion, that Clare and her first companions established their community, living on prayer and humble tasks. They were called the “Poor Sisters” and their “form of life” was the same as that of the Friars Minor: “To observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” (*Rule of St Clare*, 1, 2), preserving the union of reciprocal charity (cf. *ibid*, X, 7) and observing in particular the poverty and humility of Jesus and of his Most Holy Mother,” Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, 10 August 2011.

Holy Gospel, entrusted by the Spirit to Francis and Clare, continue to take shape in our times.



II

IN THE HISTORY OF TODAY'S MEN AND WOMEN

5. I am well aware of the *hardness* and the *delicacy* of the times in which we live.¹¹ Before my eyes, as surely before your own, is on the one hand the call of Clare to follow Christ with “*swift pace, light step, unswerving feet,*” so that, “*securely, joyfully and swiftly,*” we may hurry along “*the path of blessedness*” (cf. 2LCl 12-13); a call to *be mindful always of our commitment, seeing our beginning* (cf. 2LCl 11). We are equally aware of the repeated calls that Francis makes to us, to follow the footprints of Jesus Christ (cf. *LtrOrd* 51), and to “*persevere in discipline and in holy obedience*” and to fulfill “*with generous and firm intention what we have promised*” to the Son of God (*LtrOrd* 10). On the other hand, there is the danger of mediocrity, of routine, of a defeatist attitude which blinds us and, on not a few occasions, places *obstacles on our way* (cf. 2LCl 13), and prevents us from “*advanc-*

11 Cf. VC 13.

ing by the path of the commandments of the Lord [...], and the path of perfection which we have embraced" (2LCl 15. 17).

To the difficulties that each one experiences in following Christ are added others that come to us from the environment surrounding us. Thus, while the world asks us for an accounting of the evangelical quality of our life, it seems to live *as if God did not exist*. And a look at the mentality of many men and women of our times makes us realize that many appear to reject significant points of reference and frequently seem concerned only with seeking to satisfy their own needs. Based on this logic, what is valid in the eyes of God is not always so in human estimation. The *Poverello* himself was very conscious of this when he wrote in one of his letters: "*Know that in the sight of God there are certain things which are very lofty and sublime which are sometimes considered worthless and inferior by people; and there are other things, cherished and esteemed by people, which are considered worthless and inferior by God" (2LtrCust 2).*

From the *worldly* point of view it seems that the Gospel is one of those points from which one must take some distance if he does not wish to *complicate life*. This is so especially because the Gospel is often considered and presented as a set of norms to be observed, and which, by that very fact, tries to suffocate individual freedom and self-realization. As a consequence there are an increasing number of people who think that each one is a law unto himself. The rejection of these points of reference favors in the individual the experience of being in a wide-open field, where one encounters no limits whatsoever, nor any foundations.

In our society it is not rare that the proposal of the Gospel is considered outdated,

since it does not fit within the parameters of constant consumption and change imposed by our society; and the sphere of spirituality, the area in which the person encounters the meaning of his existence, is reduced to its purely individual dimension.

6. It is in this context that we are to live our vocation as Poor Sisters and Lesser Brothers, as consecrated persons. In regard to you, my dear Sisters, though you are separated from this world of ours, you cannot consider yourselves isolated from what it lives and breathes, nor can you consider yourselves -- even while living within the space of the enclosure -- exempt from possible external influences which do not help us to keep what we have professed as consecrated persons, just as you cannot rule out the possibility (daily experience teaches you this) that the mentality that acts *as if God does not exist* can influence our environment.

Without losing sight of what we have professed, always keeping in view our beginning point (cf. *2LCl* 11) so as to live the present as *memorial* of our origins, straining toward the future, we are called at this moment to *revisit* the demands of the following of Christ according to the Franciscan/Clarican Form of Life. And in the context of this *revisiting* of our identity, it is necessary that we, both the Brothers and the Sisters, allow ourselves to be questioned and question ourselves about why our fraternities are sometimes considered points of references and at others times are simply unknown or ignored; why some have vocations and others are passing through a prolonged vocational desert experience. It is the time to undertake a profound discernment to see what must be jealously preserved, what must be let go, and what what must be revisited and reconverted, so that the beauty of our Form

of Life may shine forth in fraternities forged by the Gospel.

It is no secret that, on the one hand, we receive numerous types of approval; on the other, both you and we have great difficulty in making others understand our vocational choices. It is urgent to ask ourselves: if a person draws near to us, what are they seeking? and what significance does our life have in the Church and the world? Further, what signs of life do we offer so that men and women of today feel they are being helped to enter the mystery of the Father revealed in Jesus? Our responses, and yours, have to be new ones, not those we have learned already. They will be such to the degree that in each of us, both individually and in fraternity, we put ourselves under discussion, as we ardently seek the face of God.

7. Without breaking our covenant with *a living past*, because moving ourselves around without any roots creates a journey with neither wisdom nor horizon,¹² it is still necessary to call a halt in our journey, to give ourselves a time of silence, reflection and personal and fraternal discernment, in order to detect the *hard soil* (cf. 1R 22, 10-26) of our heart, even in the monasteries: activism, individualism, appropriation, fixation, nostalgia, agitation, distraction, the search for security, ...; and in order to appreciate adequately our brothers and sisters, companions on the journey: their evangelical freedom, joy, a sense of belonging, openness, living *sine proprio* ...

During my visits to the monasteries of the OSC and the entities of the OFM, I am frequently asked about new instruments and methods to make our life more contem-

12 Cf. Peter John Olivi, *Principium I in Sacram Scripturam*.

porary and attractive. I ask myself, and I ask you: Is it a question only of methods and new strategies, or is it a question of *revisiting* the essential elements of our life, and making radical choices?

If we note today a certain indifference toward consecrated life and toward our Franciscan/Clarian life, it may be because we are losing the ability to be prophetic signs. The anniversary of the foundation of your Order, like the anniversary of the founding of our Order which we just celebrated three years ago, demands that we live today our Form of Life and respond to the signs of the times today, remaining faithful to that which the Spirit, through Francis and Clare, has given as a gift to the Brothers and Sisters and, through them, to the Church and the world. This does not mean a conformist adaptation of our Form of Life to what is fashionable -- *marry fashion and you will soon be widowed*, an Eastern proverb says -- but to respond to the appeals that come to us from the world incarnating the Gospel, from the center of the experience of God, in the form of expropriation/radical freedom -- living *sine proprio* as we have professed -- and in universal fraternity.

III

CULTIVATING THE ROOTS

8. There are many who affirm that religious life and also Franciscan/Clarian life are living through a season of Winter. Winter, at first glance, is a time of death: the green of vegetation disappears, the leaves fall, there are no flowers, and the season of fruit has passed. Winter puts hope to the test, hope which is nourished by patient waiting for the return of Spring and the fields clothed with flowers that will give way to fruit. Also in religious life and Franciscan/Clarian life Winter is characterized, among other symptoms, by the lack of vocations, with all that implies: inversion of the age pyramid, with many elders and few young people, the closing of works and forms of presence, diminishment of a social relevance that we often had, an increase of discouragement, routine

Winter can bring the temptation to cut down trees and plants. The only thing visible is the trunk. Yet the death that seems to mark Winter is not really such. Beneath the apparent sterility there is a process of revitalization developing. This is the season in

which the roots are busily working, storing up all the sap and life-force necessary to transmit new life in Spring, so that in Summer the fruits can be harvested. With their silent and hidden work the roots make possible the rebirth of life, because “if the grain of wheat which falls to the ground does not die, it remains alone. But if it die, it gives much fruit” (Jn 12, 24). Winter is the time of deep roots, of growth at a deep level, of a passage, even if long and painful, toward new life.

The experience of Winter is what leads me to ask you, my dear Sisters and Brothers, that we cultivate the roots. Perhaps we would have preferred to live during the season of flowers and abundant fruits, but we are given to live this profoundly fertile season of Winter. Let us accept it as such, with sober realism, but also with *certain hope*. The temptation to *throw in the towel*, not cultivating the life of faith, lacking hope, giving up the struggle, slipping into mediocrity, or sometimes even abandoning the life, may be experiences that are not unknown to some among us. But to give in to all of that would mean simply refusing to transmit life, living the present egotistically, which would have little or nothing to do with what we promised on the day of our profession. When we lack so many forms of security that we have held and lovingly cultivated, that is the moment to return to the essentials, to live a spirituality of exodus, to renew our firm intention to life *without anything of our own*.

Beyond the appearances, Winter is called to be a *kairos*, a great opportunity to grow in depth, and to be purified, to return to what really counts. Through the Winter that we are experiencing, I am convinced that the Lord calls us, you and us, to radicality. Such radicality does not consist in spectacular gestures, but in a patient and hidden

tending of roots that, in the last analysis, can be reduced to a radical faith in the One for whom nothing is impossible (cf. *Lk 1, 37*).

At this time it is not simply a matter of struggling for survival or subsistence. It is rather a matter of training yourselves in a radical faith and a hope against all hope. The first, radical faith, will lead us to live in God and live on God. This requires a journey, beginning with Christ, giving to the Gospel as our Form of Life the leading role it deserves in our existence as our *rule and life*. The second, hope, is what gives deep meaning to life. Today we face the danger of losing ourselves in the management of a simple and often anxious daily routine. Without falling into an ingenuous optimism, we must not give up that hope that springs from and is sustained by a promise: "I am with you all days" (*Mt 28, 20*). Radical faith and hope are the wellsprings from which we can draw abundant fresh water to cultivate the roots, to revitalize our life, so apparently arid, in such a way that the Winter becomes fertile, like the grain of wheat buried in the furrow.

But at the same time the image of Winter reminds me of another: that of seeking in the night. And here our guide can be the figure of Nicodemus, the prototype of every true "seeker in the night." This is the time to place ourselves in an attitude of searching, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

9. The Church invites us to "*reproduce with courage the authenticity, creativity and holiness*" of those who received the Form of Life that we profess today and, in this way, to give a response to "*the signs of the times emerging in today's world.*"¹³ It asks us to question Francis and Clare in order to

13 *VC 37*.

understand better how they in their times sought the Lord and witnessed to Him. Fidelity to the Founders demands the effort to understand the parameters within which they moved, the alternatives they encountered in their time in order to be faithful to Christ and to His Word, the areas of witness they chose for proclaiming the Gospel, the most important points for them on which to base their following of Him, how they kept alive a passion for the Kingdom despite the difficulties they encountered.

Our charism does not remain alive simply by reproducing its initial moments, but by going to the *roots*, the reasons that allowed Francis and Clare to live a Form of Life that still remains a legible sign for men and women of our day, thanks to the experience of those who continue to say “yes” to the demands of the Spirit in their lives, who *“look to the future, where the Spirit is sending them in order to do even greater things.”*¹⁴ On the other hand, we must not forget that looking toward our origins and looking toward the future must go hand-in-hand with a comparison of our life with today’s culture. Without such an evaluation we run the risk of falling into the temptation of doing archeology, or simply rushing ahead thoughtlessly.

10. Once we have identified the essential elements of the Franciscan/Clarian Form of Life we must reflect with clarity, courage and boldness, on the structures that contain these elements. This does not mean to eliminate structures, but rather to see which should remain, which have to be given new meaning, which are to be eliminated and which must be invented, in such a way that they will truly be wineskins that can pre-

14 VC 110.

serve the wine of the charism (cf. *Mk* 2, 22; *Lk* 5, 38). These must be structures that are clearly more radical and that do not spoil the aged wine of our Form of Life, but rather by their reflection of essentials, their sobriety and poverty point toward the absolute of God and, by means of a fraternal life, toward a theological and liturgical place (especially in the case of the Sisters), that is profoundly human and, at the same time, evangelical.

Dear Sisters and Brothers: Be clear in your discernment! Be bold in your decisions! Fly to the heights, without compromises with what the world offers us today! Be mindful of the love God has shown in calling us to follow this Form of Life. Only such an awareness will lead us to live *sine proprio*, to be evangelically free, and at the same time creative and faithful.¹⁵ Let us free ourselves from everything that obscures our Form of Life, so as to live each moment the Gospel that we have promised! Let us turn our energies toward the constant search for the Lord and His holy will (cf. *OCSD*). Above all, you dear Sisters, take special care for the spiritual life, commit yourselves to witness that it is possible to live always in the presence of the Lord and, in this way better serve humanity.

15 Cf. *CdC* 22.

IV

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF OUR FORM OF LIFE

11. We have already mentioned this: in moments of crisis or of Winter we have the opportunity to reflect, to take our bearings and return to what is essential. To do this we need *ontotherapy*: treatment of our being, treatment of our identity. In moments of crisis or Winter we must imitate the wise steward: sit down, analyze the problem and made a rapid decision (cf. *Lk 16, 1ff*): we do not have a great deal of time.

In the past few years as Sisters and Brothers we have dedicated a great amount of time to reflection on the basic demands of our Form of Life. The fruit of this process has been that the basic elements of our Form of Life seems to be rather clear. The following will serve to remind us of those elements and recall the urgency of making decisions consistent with them.

To Live the Gospel

12. Francis and Clare had as their existential point of reference the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Their life choices, like the Form of Life begun with Francis and continued by Clare, consist simply in “*observing the holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ*” (RCl 2; cf. 1R 1, 1).

The entire Franciscan adventure has its origin in the *revelation* made by the Most High to Francis (cf. *Test* 14), and one of the central moments of this revelation that comes to Francis through Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, is the hearing of the texts in which Jesus sketches the rule of conduct for His disciples (cf. *Lk* 10, 8-9; *Mt* 10, 7-13). Faced with such a *revelation* Francis trembled with joy and cried out with enthusiasm: “*This is what I want; this is what I seek; this is what I desire to live with all my heart*” (1*Cel* 22, 22; cf. *Test* 25; *LM* III, 1). What a memorable day! The day when Francis discovers the Gospel. It will be the Gospel that changes the heart and the life of the *Poverello*. From then on, the Gospel will be his only wisdom: “*Know that I was never led by any other knowledge than that [of the Gospel]*” (LP 114). At the origin of the vocation of Clare is the same *revelation* made to the *Blessed Father Saint Francis*, “*true love and imitator*” of Christ (cf. *TestCl* 5). In this regard, it is important to mention what Sister Clare says in her Testament: “*The Son of God has become for us the Way that our blessed father Francis has shown and taught us by word and example*” (*TestCl* 5). With good reason Clare calls him “*our pillar, our only consolation and support after God*” (*TestCl* 38), “*founder, planter, and*

helper" (*TestCl* 48). We make this same *revelation* our own at our profession. Poor Sisters and Lesser Brothers, we profess to live the holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ (*RCl* 1, 2; *2R* 2, 1). This is perhaps the most characteristic element of our common Form of Life.

13. At this point I think it would be good to remember that the Gospel, both for Clare and for Francis, is not simply a book but a person, the person of Jesus Christ (cf. *2Cel* 15). In this sense, the experience of Francis and Clare is in perfect harmony with what Vatican II affirms: Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, "is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation."¹⁶ God speaks "in many and diverse ways," in creation, by means of prophets and sages, through the Sacred Scriptures, but in a definitive way spoke by means of Jesus Christ (cf. *Heb* 1, 1 ff.). Both for Francis and for Clare the Gospel refers them immediately to Christ, so that to take the Gospel as *rule* and *life* leads them to a personal attachment to the Lord, to resembling Him in all things. It has been said of the *Poverello* that "after Jesus Christ he is the only Christian," (Renán), "the copy and most perfect image that our Lord Jesus Christ ever had," (Benedict XV), "a new exemplar of Jesus Christ" (Pius XI), "in all the deeds of his life, he was conformed to the Blessed Jesus Christ" (*Fior* 1); and he is the one who "bore Jesus in his heart, on his lips, in his ears, in his eyes, in his hands; Jesus in all his members" (*1Cel* 115). Much the same could be said of Clare: *the Christian woman*, totally devoted to the Spouse (cf. *1LCl* 7), ardently desiring to follow the Crucified One (cf. *1LCl* 14) and to be totally transformed into Him (cf. *3LCl* 13). How seductive was the love of the Lord Jesus that she experi-

16 *DV* 2.

enced (*1LCl* 9)! It is listening to the Gospel *without gloss*, conformity and following of the footprints of Jesus Christ that will allow Francis and Clare to enter fully into the mystery of God.

Both in the earlier *Rule* (cf. *Pról* y 1, 1), and the later one (cf. 1, 1), the Form of Life that Francis presents for the Church's approval is the Gospel. This, in turn, leads to total configuration with Christ: obedient, poor, and chaste. Such is also the case with Clare (cf. *RCl* 1, 1-2), who in her Testament, as we noted earlier, affirms: "*The Son of God has become for us the Way ...*" (*TestCl* 5). To profess "*to observe the holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ*" is thus for the Sisters and for the Brothers much more than carrying out what some Gospel texts say. To profess the Gospel is simply to be a "*living exegesis of the Word of God*,"¹⁷ to reproduce in ourselves the life of Jesus (cf. *Phil* 2, 5), to be completely conformed to Christ. This was the final objective of the life of Clare and of Francis. And this, my dear Sisters and Brothers, must be the first and last objective of our following of Christ.¹⁸

14. Any type of deep renewal of Franciscan/Clarian life necessarily entails returning to the Gospel as *rule and life*, to listen to it and give to it "the obedience of faith" (*Rom* 1,5). Religious life, as well as Franciscan/Clarian life, needs a present rich in passion for Christ and for humanity. And for this it is necessary to kindle a new fire, and to inject new life into the centuries-old tree of

17 Cf. *VD* 83.

18 In this respect it is important to note that Benedict XVI reminds us: "The Christian faith is not a religion of the Book," no matter how important the Scripture is for us, "but of the incarnate and living Word," *VD* 7, cf. CTI [Int'l Theo. Comm.], *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria*, 7.

our charism. This new fire and new life can only come, my dear Sisters and Brothers, from a return to the Gospel, the founding and fundamental nucleus of the charism of Francis and Clare.

As we contemplate these two people so in love with Christ, Francis and Clare, what is most urgent today is to place the Gospel at the basis of daily life, in every moment and circumstance, with all its most radical demands, as the first and last criterion of our actions, or what amounts to the same thing: to place Christ at the center of our life and mission (cf. *Phil 3, 8ss*).

The great challenge for you, beloved of the Lord, and for us, my dear brothers, is to begin once again to set out from the Gospel, and to allow ourselves to be inhabited by it, if we wish to live these times as a true *kairos* and preserve the significance of our Form of Life for the men and women of today, since only in this way can we guarantee the future toward which the Spirit moves us, in order to continue doing great things with us.¹⁹

19 *VC* 110.



*My God and my All!*²⁰

15. For Francis the Lord was everything (cf. *PrG*). The *Poverello* keeps asking us to give ourselves totally to Him who gave Himself totally for us (cf. *LtrOrd* 29). There is a text that deserves to be recalled. In the first *Rule* Francis writes: “*With our whole heart, our whole soul, our whole mind, with our whole strength and fortitude, with our whole understanding, with all our powers, with every effort, every affection, every feeling, every desire and wish, let us all love the Lord God Who has given and gives to each one of us our whole body, our whole soul and our whole life [...].*” And he continues: “*let us desire nothing else, let us want nothing else, let nothing else please us and cause us delight except our Creator, Redeemer and Savior, the only true God, Who is the fullness of good, all good, every good, the true and supreme good [...] let nothing hinder us, nothing separate us, nothing come between us; wherever we are, in every place, at every hour, at every time of the day, every day and continually, let all of us truly and humbly believe, hold in our heart and love, honor, adore, serve, praise and bless, glorify and exalt, magnify and give thanks to the Most High [...]*” (1R XXIII, 8 ff). All, nothing, there is not a thing comparable to him. Francis: “*true lover and imitator*” of Christ (cf. *TestCl* 5), “*now become not one who prays but prayer itself*” (2*Cel* 95), the lover who identifies himself with the Beloved (cf. *LM* XIII, 5). There is good reason for saying that “*for Francis God has*

20 Fior 2. We will find an echo of this formulation of the strictly monotheistic faith of Francis in the “*solo Dios basta*” [“God alone is enough”] of Saint Theresa of Jesus.

a name: Love"²¹ and that Francis founded a mystical Order.²²

We can say as much for Clare. This woman of contemplative mind, soul and heart calls for self-giving, without any reservation, in eternal love (cf. 5LCl 3-4; 1LCl 5) to the One who is "more handsome than the sons of men" (2LCl 20), careful not to be overcome by the shadows of mediocrity, nor by bitterness or sadness produced by "the mire of the world" (5LCl 2).

Clare, also following in this regard the blessed Father Francis, as she likes to call him, is a woman totally centered on Jesus Christ, a spouse deeply in love with her Spouse, an authentically contemplative soul. "Christ's large eyes [in the San Damiano cross] which had fascinated Francis were to become Clare's 'mirror.'"²³ Clare learned in the school of Francis that God is the real beauty (cf. 4Cta-Cl 10; AID 4). Thus she allowed her heart to be illuminated by that splendor, making it possible for her never to quench "the spirit of holy prayer and devotion" (cf. RCl 7, 2; Proc IV, 4; VI, 3), and allowing herself to be transformed, entirely, by contemplation (cf. 3LCl 13), living in a constant state of conversion, in a constant search for God, in a permanent attitude of obedience in faith. In listening to God she is formed in the Word that calls to her.

Francis and Clare: two hearts deeply in love with the Lord, who meet and recognize in each other twin souls in the Beloved. Their lives are love as a reply to Love (cf. LM IX, 1).

21 B. Duclos, *Francis, Image of Christ*, in *Concilium* (1981/9).

22 St Bonaventure, *Col. In Hexaemeron*, XXII, 22.

23 Benedict XVI, *MMOF*, 16.

16. The contemplation of Francis and Clare starts with a gaze full of wonder at the mystery of the Incarnation, Passion and death of the Lord. It is well known that Francis loved to celebrate the Nativity more than any other feast (cf. 2Cel 199), and what most amazed him -- and here there is a strong parallel with Clare -- was the humility of God who becomes human (cf. 1Cel 84). At Christmas there is born "*the same true God and true man of the glorious ever-virgin the most blessed holy Mary (1R 23, 5), as the Word of the Father [...] received the true flesh of our humanity and frailty*" (2F 4-5). The contemplation of this mystery of love and humility leads Francis to become a "*child with the Child*" (2Cel 35). For Francis the mystery of the Incarnation is continuously prolonged in the Eucharist, in which "*each day the Son of God humbles himself, as when he descended from the royal throne into the womb of the Virgin; each day he comes to us under a humble appearance*" (Adm 1, 16ff). The contemplation of the birth always goes together with the contemplation of the Passion of Jesus, which he himself wished to represent in his own death (cf. 2Cel 114). The birth and the Passion of the Lord constantly occupied the mind of Francis: "*the humility of the Incarnation and the charity of the Passion so filled his soul that he could scarcely think of anything else*" (1Cel 84).

For her part, in the Letters to Agnes, the *Little Plant of Francis* shows us how also in her case contemplation begins always with gazing, attentively and filled with wonder and gratitude, at the mystery of the Incarnation. The One "*whom the heavens could not contain*" lowered Himself to make his dwelling "*in the small enclosure*" of the "*sacred womb*" of the maiden of Nazareth (3LCl 18-19). The "*Lord of lords*" (2LCl 1), "*so worthy, so holy and glorious,*" on receiving "*the true flesh of our humanity and frailty*" (2LCl 4), "*wished*

to appear in the world as one who is looked down upon, indigent and poor” (1LCl 19), “and, being rich beyond measure (2Cor 8, 9), wished to choose poverty in this world, together with the blessed Virgin, his Mother” (2LF 5).

Filled with wonder before such abasement of the Son of God, Clare can do no less than exclaim: *“O admirable humility! O amazing poverty! The King of the angels, the Lord of heaven and earth (cf. Mt 11, 25), is placed in a manger” (4LCl 20- 21).*

Clare’s gazing on the mystery of the Incarnation is that of spouse to Spouse, that of a heart deeply in love that contemplates the Incarnation of the Word in the light of that love without limits that God has for humanity. This is the attentive and constant gaze -- *daily ... constantly (4LCl 15)* -- that leads her to discover the beauty of Jesus Christ, *“the Spouse of most noble lineage” (1LCl 7), with the “most beautiful appearance” (1LCl 9), “whose beauty the blessed hosts of heaven admired without ceasing” and “whose glorious vision will gladden all the citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem” (4LCl 10. 13).*

But if the poverty and humility of Bethlehem ignite a sense of interior wonder and amazement in Clare and conquer her heart for God, Calvary will be the privileged place of the spousal love of the virgin Clare. It is in the passion and death that the love of God for humanity is manifested in its ultimate consequences, His *“ineffable charity” (4LCl 23)*. For this reason, faced with the scandal of the cross, the gaze of Clare becomes penetrating, passionate, and filled with compassion: *“As a poor virgin embrace the poor Christ. Look upon Him Who became contemptible for you, and follow Him, making yourself contemptible in this world for Him ... Gaze, consider, contemplate, desiring to imitate Your Spouse ..., who became, for your salvation,*

the lowest of men, was despised, struck, scourged untold times throughout His entire body, and then died amid the suffering of the Cross" (2LCl 18-20). Constant contemplation of the scandal of the Passion and the Cross make Clare a passionate lover of the poor crucified Christ, as John Paul II rightly called her.

The Incarnation, Passion and death of Jesus are the pillars of the contemplation of Francis and Clare: he was "*placed poor in the crib, lived poor in this world, and remained naked on the cross*" (TestCl 45). This contemplation in Francis and Clare reveals the following aspects: it is loving – "*the science and art of loving*" as contemplation would be defined by Francisco de Osuna –; it is closely joined to poverty or, perhaps better, to living *sine proprio*, and, as such, entails ceasing to consider oneself the center, abandoning the spirit of possessing and dominating, and adopting an attitude of generosity, in such a way that the fulness of God may be seen transparently in the person (cf. *LtrOrd* 29); it is inseparable from wonder and praise that speak of the "excess" of love with which the contemplative is filled (cf. *PrG* 3-4); and finally, such contemplation creates fraternity and in turn finds in it the most appropriate means of expression.

17. Wrapped in silence and immersed in a solitude inhabited by the Spirit, Francis and Clare take on a contemplative outlook on history and reality, a sacramental way of seeing, that leads them to pass from a *seeing* according to the flesh to a *seeing and believing* (cf. *Adm* 19- 21), and in this way to grasping within history and reality the mystery of God who is present and at work there. On the other hand, joining solitude with communion, Francis and Clare learn from God to live in freedom: everything in their lives is arranged to preserve relationships. Man

and Woman of profound interiority, their roots are securely set in the love of Jesus Christ.

Understood in this way, contemplation for Francis and Clare is essentially a life of union with God, to the point of being totally transformed into icons of His divinity (cf. 3CtaCl 13); it is *knowledge* of Christ, total self-offering to Him, and the firm will to follow Him at every moment; it is openness to the mystery of God who surrounds us in order to allow us to be possessed by Him. In this sense contemplation consists in emptying oneself totally of anything superfluous so that the One who is All may fill the heart to overflowing.

*The Brothers and the Sisters,
men and women in love with Christ*

18. For a Lesser Brother and a Poor Sister, the God revealed in Jesus must occupy the center of all their existence. God and the search for Him become the emblem, the mission, and the motor of their lives. The goal of their lives, like that of the life of every contemplative, is “*quaerere Deum, seeking God.*”²⁴ As Brothers and Sisters we are called to be *monotropes*, persons who attend to only one thing: to God. Our most radical vocation is that of “*tasting the hidden sweetness that God has reserved for those who love Him*” (3LCl 14). That is why Francis insists that nothing in our lives can take precedence over the Lord: everything in the life of the Brothers and Sisters must serve *the spirit of prayer and devotion* (cf. LAnt 2; 2R 5,2; RCl 7, 2).

24 Benedict XVI, *Meeting with Representatives of the World of Culture*. Collège des Bernardins, Paris, 12 September 2008.

Called to have our mind, soul and heart turned toward the Lord (cf. *1R* 22, 19ss; *3LCI* 12-13), as Brothers and Sisters we must find in contemplation, as union with God and radical option for Jesus Christ, our ultimate reason for existence and our true mission.

With that, there must be eliminated from the life of a Brother or a Sister who are to be considered true contemplatives any activism that quenches the spirit of prayer and devotion, but also to be excluded is any mediocrity, routine, or weariness. To be contemplative is to take on the Gospel with its most radical demands, without diluting them, without justifying accommodation to a comfortable way of life. Contemplation, for the followers of Francis and Clare, is to make an exclusive option for the Lord, offering Him our life to the point of being able to say with Saint Paul *"I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me"* (*Gal* 2, 20). Contemplation for a Lesser Brother and a Poor Sister is being able to say with Francis *"My God and all"* and with Clare: only the Spouse is enough, because this means the One whose *"strength is more robust, generosity more lofty, whose appearance is more handsome, love more courteous and every kindness more refined"* (*1LCI* 9). Franciscan/Clarian contemplation must always be seen within the horizon of the following of Christ. The following of a Lesser Brother or a Poor Sister is a contemplative following. Therefore contemplation can never be separated from the evangelical quality of life, in accordance with the *proposal* of life we have embraced by our profession (cf. *2LCI* 11), nor from the firm will to *"progress from good to better, from virtue to virtue"* (*1LCI* 32), and to hurry unfettered along the path of blessedness (cf. *2LCI* 12-13).

All of this is impossible without a deep experience of faith that forms all of human existence: our thoughts and affections, our

mentality and behavior.²⁵ A contemplative life is not possible without a personal encounter with the person of Jesus. Only based on faith that springs from and is sustained by a personal encounter with Jesus, can one grasp what is happening in what does not happen, to glimpse unity within the fragmented, the eternal within that which is passing, the divine within the human. Only faith makes possible the passage from seeing according to the flesh to seeing and believing according to the eyes of God. Inviting us to cross the threshold of faith (cf. *Hech* 14, 27), Benedict XVI affirms: “We cannot accept that salt should become tasteless or the light be kept hidden” (cf. *Mt* 5, 13-16). The year of faith called for by Benedict XVI could be a good occasion to “rediscover the joy of believing and the enthusiasm for communicating the faith.”²⁶

But in this journey neither the Brothers nor the Sisters can ever forget that passion for Christ is passion for humanity. For this reason their contemplation cannot be alien to the life of the human person and peoples, and that which affects them. This reality is to be present at every moment in the life and the prayer of contemplatives. Clare already reminded her Sisters at San Damiano of this: “Dearest daughters, every day we receive many good things from that city. It would be terrible if, at a proper time, we did not help it, as we now can” (*LgCl* 15). A Lesser Brother and a Poor Sister must feel themselves in communion with all, to present all before the Lord, with their joys and sorrows, their hopes and frustrations. They will bring all in their hearts, fixed on the Mirror, and will welcome all in their contemplative souls.

25 Cf. Benedict XVI, *Motu Proprio, The Door of Faith*, Rome, 2011, 6.

26 *Idem* 7.

This will be possible if we as Brothers and Sisters cultivate a dynamic spirituality that makes us children of heaven and children of earth at the same time; an integrated spirituality that leads us to live in its fulness love for God and love for others; a spirituality in tension that allows us to be both mystics and prophets. Our Form of Life demands this, and our contemporaries expect this of us.

The Clarian method of contemplation

19. But what steps can be taken to reach true contemplation? Let us focus on Clare. The *new woman* is not only a contemplative soul, she is also a teacher of contemplation, and as such offers us a method to follow. This method can be summarized in three verbs that appear in the second letter of Clare to Agnes: *gaze* (observe), *consider* and *contemplate*.

Gaze, to observe carefully: "Gaze upon that mirror each day ... Look, I say, at the border of this mirror, that is, the poverty of Him who was placed in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes" (4LCl 15ss). Gazing implies putting into play all our feelings, until we are clothed with Christ (cf. Gal 3, 27; Ef 4 24), having His same feelings (cf. Phil 2, 5). This does not mean a romantic experience in front of the manger, but a real experience of poverty. The contemplative gazing to which Clare invites us includes a definite option for poverty, following in this way the path chosen by the Son of God (cf. TestCl 5). Far from being a gazing on oneself, this means going out of oneself and contemplating the poverty of the One who became "contemptible for you." For Clare there is now no other path for one who gazes on the poverty of Christ except that of becoming poor oneself: "Follow Him, making yourself

contemptible in this world for Him" (2LCl 19).

Consider. For Clare, considering includes the mind and leads to perceiving humility, as a contrast that scandalizes and fascinates: the King of the angels is wrapped in swaddling clothes and is laid in a manger (cf. 2LCl 19-20). For Clare, as for Francis, poverty and humility are closely united (cf. *SalVir* 2). Poverty shows clearly the condition of those who are poor in material goods, humility expresses the depth of poverty: abasement, humiliation, contempt. If poverty is the negation of wealth, humility is the negation of power. Humility is the *kenotic* condition of following. For Clare, considering means following Christ in His humility and His abasement.

Contemplate. Contemplating involves principally the heart, which is for Clare the place of the covenant with the Spouse. In this sense, contemplation expresses total and radical self-giving, the communion that allows her to delight in God. For this it is necessary to have the heart turned completely toward the Lord. This will allow her to have a pure heart (cf. *RCl* 10, 10), to see with the eyes of God. Contemplating, as we said earlier, is simply following Christ in the radical way proposed by the Gospel.

Gaze-consider-contemplate, more than steps, are dimensions of a single process that goes far beyond mere intellectual consideration, and which leads to an experience that involves the whole person in every dimension: spiritual and intellectual, the affections and senses, resulting in a choice of life that is conformed to what is contemplated. In this way Clarian contemplation is like authentic love: all-encompassing (cf. 3LCl 12-13; 4LCl 15), it leads to following and to complete identification with the person

loved, to transformation of the loved into the Beloved.

20. To come to such identification or to such a degree of contemplation, silence becomes necessary. Clare thinks so, according to her *Rule* (cf. *RCl* 5), and so too does the Church and the very *Constitutions* of the Poor Sisters: "The search for intimacy with God implies the vital necessity of a silence of one's whole being."²⁷ The Poor Sister who wishes to remain in that intimacy with the Spouse and to be transformed in Him must drive from her soul "every noise" (*LCl* 36). Is silence necessary only for the Sisters? I do not believe so. Silence, coming before the Word of God and the Word about God, is also necessary for the Brothers. Francis, with his love for remote places, is teaching us the value of silence: a silence that is not just external, but especially internal, made up of solitude and listening, of a harmonious relationship between silence and word.

But it is one thing to be quiet and something very different to have a silence that is inhabited. This is not mutism, it is rather a being there, with a vivifying and creative presence. The silence of which we are speaking is the presence of the "I" in the "thou," an intimate presence of the Lord in one's life. Being quiet has an ascetical character, while silence is to be understood in a mystical perspective: to be with God, with oneself and with others. Then silence is born in word, in work, in encounter. And the form of speaking is *discretio* (cf. *RCl* 5, 8) and *devotio* (cf. *RCl* 7, 2). And it all points to mutual love and a peace that is both interior and exterior (cf. *RCl* 4, 22). The silence of which Francis and Clare speak to us is made up of solitude and listening, of a har-

²⁷ *Evangelica Testificatio* 46; *CCGG OSC* 81.

monious relationship between silence and word.

But the most necessary thing for a life that is truly contemplative is personal and fraternal prayer (cf. *RCl* 3), prayerful listening to the Word, and an intense liturgical life.

The enclosure at the service of contemplation

21. I now wish to refer to the enclosure of the Sisters, an element that defines the specific nature of the Clarian life within the Franciscan charism. As Brothers and Sisters we share the wealth of the charism: poverty, fraternity, catholicity, missionary charism ... Yet perhaps a special demand is made of the Poor Sister by means of the enclosure: to be faithful and constant at the wellsprings of mystery, through a life oriented exclusively to contemplation. It is true that as Brothers and Sisters we are both called to maintain a strong and indissoluble union with the root of our consecrated life, which is Jesus, contemplated in His mystery of love and of pain, but if this is the common goal toward which we must orient our lives, the means employed are different. While you, Sisters, have been called to maintain your gaze primarily in a direct way at the Mirror, we Brothers have been called to give witness to Him and proclaim Him in the world. I would underline the word "primarily" since it would be unfaithful on your part if you should lose sight of the humanity for which you are giving your life in the cloister; as it would be unfaithful on our part if we were to lose sight of Jesus, to Whom we have given ourselves by our profession, and who is the only one who sustains our apostolic work. I think that we can help each other a great deal in this regard: as you remind us

that there is time that must be wasted only for Him, for He needs to be with us and we with Him; we, to draw you out of a quietism that could lead you to close yourselves within your daily rhythm, in your internal problems. We can and must offer you our experience of God, rich in encounter with the poverty of humanity; while you must offer us the face of Jesus in Whose mystery you live daily, without distractions, thanks to a life that is deeply contemplative. Thus you will help us to make our work more "divine;" while we help you to make your contemplation more concrete and human.

Keeping in mind what we have said, enclosure is an important element in the form of life of the Poor Sisters who have chosen an entirely contemplative life. A contemplation like that we have indicated can survive only in vital space of enclosure. The "I" can only give itself to the "Other" if there is a reconciled interior harmony.

Enclosure among the Poor Sisters is not an end in itself, but an instrument for safeguarding life in God. Contemplation and enclosure are closely united. In this sense enclosure has its full meaning when it is lived as a space of relationship. The enclosure should help the person in every dimension -- mind, heart and body -- to maintain a privileged, intense relationship with the person of the Lord Jesus. By means of the enclosure the Poor Sister makes visible a new way of relating learned in the school of the Trinity.

Regarding the enclosure of the mind, I consider it very close to the *sancta simplicitas*, so loved by Francis, which is the purity of gaze that goes beyond any type of ambiguity or duplicity. This enclosure of the mind is closely related to formation. In this sense a Poor Clare Sister must be formed to be able

to read the events of her life with that prophetic gaze that goes beyond the concrete fact, to recognize within it the work of God. The enclosure of the heart must help the Sister to widen the spaces of her heart, to love with a free heart; free because closely joined to Jesus, and in Him to all those brothers for whom Jesus gave His life. The enclosure of the heart must give great attention to the quality of relationships. A Poor Clare Sister belong, above all, to Him and in Him to the Church, especially that first Church which is the community. This must become transparent in all the relationships of a Sister. The enclosure of the body refers to the physical fact of the enclosure, to your way of living "separated." This enclosure involves renunciation, but this is easily overcome if your separation is inhabited by Him, and in Him, for others. But this enclosure also should lead you to broaden your perspective of life, offering an alternative to the normal way of relating to other persons.

Thus, the enclosure is not so much a separation as a new type of relationship: with God and, consequently, with others. In any case, and valuing your enclosure as a radical form of living *sine proprio*, and as a *unicum* within the Franciscan/Clarian charism, I think that you Poor Sisters are called to make a stop in the journey, and to ask yourselves if stability, which is certainly a distinctive mark of contemplative life, has not been transformed into immobility, and if stability continues or not to take on the theology of the tent, in such a way that stability and enclosure can continue to be a living sign of hope among those who live distracted, and as if God did not exist.

Having been called to spend your life in living only for God, it is necessary that the Poor Sister reexamine and give new meaning to the coordinates of her living in sta-

bility and enclosure. Only in this way will she be a sign for the world of today, divided and fragmented. For this it is necessary also for the monasteries to be transformed into place of inhabited silence, of listening, of acceptance for those who feel lost, for those who feel the need of friendship, for those who seek and wish to encounter the Lord and, in this way, to give new meaning to their lives.



Who is Jesus for me?

What place does He occupy in my life and the life of my fraternity?

How do I live in the concrete life of every day the contemplative dimension?

Does there exist in my life and the life of my fraternity an “ecological life project” in which there are guaranteed times for myself, for God, for my Brothers/Sisters, for mission?

In the case of the Sisters, how do I live enclosure, as an alternative form of relationship or as absence and simple separation?

Fraternal Life in Community or Holy Unity

22. Francis and Clare live out their following of the poor Christ in the communion of fraternal life or *holy unity*. From the time that the Lord gave Brothers to Francis and *enlightened* the heart of Clare and gave her Sisters (cf. *TestC* 24- 25), both the *Poverello* and his *Little Plant* understood themselves only in their mutual relations with the Brothers and Sisters. The Form of Life which both have transmitted to us is designed for living in fraternity. This is demonstrated by the quantity and variety of terms that we find in the Form of Life of Francis and Clare which indicate the fraternal relations among the Brothers and among the Sisters.²⁸

Keeping in mind this simple fact, there is no doubt that fraternity or *holy unity* is one of the most characteristic and distinctive notes of the Form of Life of the Poor Sisters and the Lesser Brothers, an indispensable element in the Franciscan/Clarian plan of life. For Clare, as for Francis, Fraternity is the place in which the Gospel is lived every day, the privileged arena in which witness is given of a God who is communion in diversity, and diversity in communion, the *humus* in which there blossoms communal praise, contemplative joy and peace, all fruits of the Spirit and characteristics of the first Franciscan/Clarian fraternities.

28 Cf. G. Boccali, *Concordantiae verbales opusculorum s. Francisci et s. Clarae Assisiensium*, Ed. Porciuncula, Assisi 1995; Sebastian López, *El vocabulario de la sororidad en la Forma de Vida de santa Clara de Asís*, in *Verdad y Vida* 258 (2011) 45-76.

Both for Francis and Clare, fraternity speaks of *equality*. If all are Brothers/Sisters, then all are equal.²⁹ Fraternity speaks of *reciprocity*. If a Brother/Sister is alone, he or she is not Brother or Sister. Thus all must “consider how to rouse one another to love and good works.” (Hb 10, 24). Finally, Fraternity speaks of *familiarity*. If all are Brothers and Sisters, all must act in a familial way among themselves, since all are part of the same family.

The Fraternal Life of the Brothers and Sisters

23. Called to follow the holy Gospel and the footprints of Jesus Christ, the Brothers and Sisters are constituted in fraternity and as fraternity. If consecrated life is in its entirety called to be a *signum fraternitatis*,³⁰ fraternal life for the Brothers and Sisters is their most attractive aspect, their vocation and mission, their way of living the Gospel and witnessing to Christ (cf. Jn 13, 35). Furthermore, for us fraternal life is essential for human and spiritual growth, as also for you, my dear Sisters who have chosen a completely contemplative life. The true contemplative listens to the voice of God in others, sees the face of God in the others’ faces, knows the will of God in the person of the other, serves the heart of God curing wounds and responding to calls from the other. Fraternity puts to the test the human and spiritual depth of each person.

In a world marked by individualism,

29 The name brother or sister identifies all of them without exception. It identifies Francis and Clare (cf. *2LtrF* 1. 87; *LtrLeo* 1; *LtrAnt* 1; *2R* 1, 2); Clare (cf. *RCl* 1, 5; *BICl* 6); the Ministers (cf. *IR* 4, 1; 5, 7; 18, 1; 22, 26; *2R* 8, 1; 10, 1-2); the Abbess (cf. *RCl* 2, 10; 4, 5. 17. 20; 9, 5; 10, 1).

30 Cf. *VC*. C.II.

fragmentation, violence and division, one in which primary groupings like the family and even friendship have weakened, Fraternity is a prophetic denunciation of that reality, and the proclamation, which is also prophetic, that a different world, based on respect and acceptance, is possible. In this sense we can see that fraternal life in itself is evangelizing.

Basis of fraternal life in community

24. Though Fraternity is one of the aspects on which we have worked most in recent decades, we must still recognize that fraternal life in community continues to be a challenge, and one of the elements of our Form of Life that is most difficult, and therefore one of its most fragile elements when it comes to living it deeply. Fraternity speaks of a reality that transcends bonds of blood, as well as those that come from a common culture, from friendship or shared work. To speak of Fraternity is to speak of a reality that sinks its deepest roots in God Himself: "... *the Lord gave me brothers*" (Test 14), the Lord gave me sisters (cf. *TesCl* 25). Fraternal life in community has much to do with faith in a God that becomes gift in the brothers and sisters.

Only when one understands clearly that the brother or sister is a gift of God do possible differences pale and, rather than being seen as threats to one's own individuality, they are accepted as manifestations of a God who makes all things new and in so doing never repeats Himself. Only when I profess with a grateful heart: "*the Lord gave me brothers and sisters*" will the others cease to be strangers to me but can be considered an *alter ego*; then I will be able to pay attention to the other (cf. *Heb* 10, 24), become aware of his needs and respond with concern; sens-

ing that I am the “keeper” of my brothers and sisters (cf. *Gn* 4, 9), establishing mutual relationships characterized by attentive care for the good of the other, and at every level: physical, moral, and spiritual.³¹

Fraternal correction

25. Thus it will also be possible to give fraternal correction, a demand of love toward the brother or sister who sins (cf. *Mt* 18, 15); not carried out in a spirit of condemnation or recrimination, but “*in a gentle spirit*” (cf. *Gal* 6, 1), with humility and love (cf. *1R* 5, 5), always moved by charity expressed toward the one who sins (cf. *LtrM* 9). Far from becoming angry and upset over the sin of another (cf. *1R* 5, 7-8; *LtrM* 15; *RCl* 9, 5), we pray “*that the Lord will enlighten her heart to do penance*” (*RCl* 9,4). Evangelical and Franciscan fraternal correction always arises out of love and mercy, a true concern for the good of the brother or sister. As Benedict XVI reminds us, “*in a world pervaded by individualism, it is essential to rediscover the importance of fraternal correction, so that together we may journey towards holiness [...] improve our lives and walk more uprightly in the Lord’s ways.*”³² Let us take care, dear Brothers and Sisters, not to become victims of that “*spiritual anesthesia*” that leads us to lose interest in others. Let this never happen in a fraternity of Brothers or Sisters! Let us listen to the Apostle Paul who invites us to seek that which leads “*to peace and to building up one another*” (*Rm* 14, 19), and, as members of one body, belonging one to another, “*that the parts may have the same concern for one another*” (*1Cor* 12, 25).

Communion of life in Franciscan/Clari-

31 Cf. Benedict XVI, *Message for Lent* 2012.

32 *Idem*.

an fraternity, based on listening to the Gospel that becomes life, finds in *“the unity of mutual love”* (RCl 10, 7) its first and most eloquent expression. This unity, lived in acceptance and appreciation for the difference of the other, places the Brothers and Sisters within a dynamic process of conversion, in a state of constant formation, in which they are always called anew to build authentic relationships with one’s self, with the Brothers and Sisters, with God, with others, and with Creation. In this way they *“gradually become free from the need to be at the center of everything and to possess the other, and from the fear of giving themselves to their brothers and sisters. They learn rather to love as Christ loved them, with that love which now is poured forth in their hearts, making them capable of forgetting themselves and giving themselves as the Lord did.”*³³

26. Experts in living that restitution of the love that God has poured into our hearts (cf. Rm 5, 5) by means of words, feelings, behaviors, and daily choices, the Lesser Brother or Poor Sister will not find in the Fraternity a comfortable refuge, but the place in which to express the commitment to build communion, feeling responsible for the fidelity of the other and the fidelity of the choices made by the Fraternity itself, favoring a climate of serenity, of understanding and mutual help.³⁴ Fraternal life in community is, in this way, a gift and a task. As a gift, we give thanks to the Lord, from whom every gift comes; as a task, it is carried out on the basis of a constant emptying of self -- *to live without anything of one’s own* -- based on a logic of gift, without any reservation.

Guarding themselves against *“all pride,*

33 *Vida fraterna en comunidad* [Fraternal Life in Community] (=VFC), 22.

34 Cf. VFC, 57.

vainglory, envy, avarice, care and anxiety about this world, detraction and murmuring, dissension and division" (RCl 10, 6), the Brother and Sister will give themselves more each day to the Fraternity and, at the same time, will sustain it, contemplating it in the mystery of God. This contemplation expresses, then, its thanksgiving for all that the Fraternity constantly receives. The Lesser Brother and the Poor Sister are well aware that a true Fraternity is formed in the contemplation of the love of the Trinity, in which is learned the beauty and positive value of others and oneself; adjusting one's own needs in view of the needs of others; remaining always open to relationship, as God does with us even when we are not faithful (cf. 2Tim 2, 13).

Only when sustained by this love can fraternal life in community or *holy unity* overcome those inevitable conflicts that will arise and yet remain intact afterward: "*It is always possible to improve and to walk together towards a community that is able to live in forgiveness and love. Communities cannot avoid all conflicts. The unity which they must build is a unity established at the price of reconciliation.*"³⁵ When a Fraternity of Lesser Brothers or Poor Sisters takes this path it starts to become a true school of communion.³⁶

Building fraternity

27. Since fraternity is a relationship of love, and love that is mutual (cf. RCl 4, 22; 10, 7), to achieve this it is important to form and to be formed in the horizontal dimension of relationships within the Fraternity, with natural respect for forms of service. In particular, those called to exercise the ministry

35 Cf. VFC, 26.

36 Cf. NMI, 43.

of authority are designated to live a particular “obedience” in the following of Christ, who came to serve and not to be served (cf. *Mt* 20, 28; *Adm* 4).

For Clare as for Francis, this way of exercising authority is expressed in various ways: being a builder of communion (cf. *LtrM* 9ff; *RCl* 4, 11-12), through admonition and correction, as already said, of the brothers and sisters (cf. *1R* 5, 1ss; *RCl* 10, 1; 9, 1), by guarding the charism (cf. *RCl* 6, 11), in accompanying the brothers and sisters entrusted to them (cf. *1R* 4, 6; *RCl* 4, 9), encouraging corresponsibility and collaboration (cf. *RCl* 2, 1-2; 4, 15. 19. 22-24).

Called to serve the Brothers and Sisters like Francis and Clare, those who have been placed over others (cf. *Adm* 4, 2) will be the first to cultivate life in the Spirit in order to carry out the necessary discernment about the Brothers and Sisters and about the Fraternity (cf. *1R* 16, 5), letting themselves be guided in all matters by what they “consider best before God” (*1R* 5, 6); they will be diligent in encouraging the gifts that each Brother and Sister have received from the Lord; they will give encouragement and hope to those experiencing difficult moments in their lives; they will take care to keep alive the charism and the ecclesial sense of the Fraternity; and, well aware that ongoing formation is the basis for creative fidelity to our vocation and mission, they will accompany the process of ongoing formation of the Brothers and Sisters.³⁷

Among the means for building fraternity the Minister and Abbesses, along with all the Brothers and Sisters, must have special care and concern for communication and interpersonal relationships.

37 Cf. *The Service of Authority and Obedience (=SAO)*, 13.

Communication mean making others participants, not just in what I do, but also in what I think and what I feel. To lead a fraternal life in community means speaking about, sharing our own story, what we are doing, and what we have received. This is our life, with its daily ups and downs, its joys and shadows, that in which God Himself is a hidden actor, in which His love is both shown and hidden. In a world constantly communicating by technical means, we run the risk of superficial communication, even in our fraternities. I am not exaggerating when I express a conviction: we need to grow a great deal in communication, especially in communicating the hidden story of God's love. As people who have consecrated our lives to the Lord and have entrusted ourselves with all our hearts to the fraternity, communicating what God is doing with us should be the guideline of our life. We need to grow a great deal in spiritual communication, knowing that this requires a climate of respect, of acceptance, of freedom and spiritual friendship.

Interpersonal relationships for their part must be characterized among us by being familial. Beware of merely virtual relationships! As Brothers and Sisters we are called to be experts in relationship. Therefore, besides favoring among ourselves warm and authentic relationships, we must face conflicts with an adult attitude. We must not forget that communication and relationship are made up of words, of signs, and of silence. There are words, and signs and silences that stop communication and interpersonal relationships, just as there are words, signs and silences that promote them.

But beyond the responsibility of the Minister or the Abbess for the building of fraternity, Fraternity and *holy unity* will be cared for by each Brother and Sister to the degree

that they abandon their own will in order to carry out the plan of God for them and the Fraternity, in obedience to the will of the Father, according to the example of Christ (cf. 2 LtrF 11), who “*learned obedience from what he suffered.*” And all of this is true even in particularly difficult situations.³⁸


In this task of building fraternity we cannot fail to strengthen at every moment a shared sense of belonging: to each other and all of us to the Lord. This idea of mutual belonging will increase our sense of complementarity: we need each other much more than we think. No one is an extra in our common reality, because while different we make up one body. Communication and interpersonal relationships have a great deal to do with this sense of mutual belonging, in which one tries to include the lives of others in one’s own, sharing what each of us is, based on our common belonging to the Lord.

One enters the fraternity giving thanks, because everything in it is a gift given to us. If there is anything that destroys our fraternities it is the pretension of being above others, becoming judges of our brothers and sisters. This is due to our projecting onto them our dreams, and we demand of God and of others that they fulfill them. Loving our dream of fraternity more than the real fraternity, we turn into destroyers of fraternity. We begin to be accusers of our brothers, and then we accuse God, and finally we become desperate accusers of ourselves. We must remember that there will never exist that ideal fraternity that can accept our dreams of pretentious pride, and that the fraternity is built on the basis of pardon and reconciliation, since it has so much to do with our own limitations and those of others.

38 Cf. SAO, 10.

Fraternity and *holy unity*, as we speak of them, require that we also open ourselves to relationships beyond our own Fraternity. In this sense I think that the time has come to review the autonomy of the provinces and monasteries, in such a way that greater emphasis is given to the sense of belonging to a Fraternity that goes beyond the confines of one's own monastery or one's entity. This demands renouncing self-sufficiency, no matter what the means at a community's disposal, and open ourselves to fraternal collaboration and interdependence. Communion that opens doors is the best antidote to weariness and lack of hope that sometimes are also present among the Sisters.

Finally, Fraternity or *holy unity* is far from being uniformity. Both the Sisters and the Brothers are called to accept diversity as wealth. This will be possible only based on a vision of faith that will lead it to see the one at my side as a gift from the Lord. Fraternal communion creates holy unity in diversity. It is then that unity liberates, enables and supports.



What diagnosis would you make of the fraternal life in your community?

What are the positive and negative symptoms you see in the fraternal life of your fraternity?

What tools do you use in the construction/ destruction of the fraternity in which you live?

What would you say about fraternal correction in your fraternity? Is there a plan of fraternal life drawn up by the fraternity?

If it does not exist, what steps can be taken to create it?

Without anything of one's own

28. One of the important elements of the Form of Life of Francis and Clare is living *without anything of one's own* (cf. 2R 1, 1; RCl 1, 2). Its position between obedience and chastity makes us think that *sine proprio* is the key to living the one and the other, and not only this, but that it is also the key to living many other aspects of the Franciscan/Clarian charism. In this sense, I believe that to speak of *sine proprio* means speaking of one of the essential characteristics of Franciscan spirituality, centered on the following of the Poor Christ, understandable only in the light of a love that embraces all.

Francis and Clare, free of everything to love the One who is All

29. For Francis and Clare poverty has a face and a name, the face and name of Jesus Christ, Poor and Crucified (cf. 2LCl 19), and finds its highest expression in living *without anything of one's own* (RCl 1, 2). "To follow the teaching and the footprints of Our Lord Jesus Christ" is above all to embrace His poverty (cf. 1R 1; 2R, 6): "to follow the footprints and the poverty of the Lord" (LtrLeo 3). To sell all, and give it to the poor, to live *without anything of one's own* forms part of the founding experience of Francis and Clare, becoming the dominant and distinctive note of "doing penance" (RCl 6, 1), of "being converted to Jesus Christ."³⁹

³⁹ Many witnesses at the process of canonization insist that Clare gave all she had to the poor: cf. *Process* 2, 22; 3, 31; 19, 2.

Clare, like Francis, referring to one who wishes to embrace her form of life, asks that the word of the Gospel be proclaimed to her (cf. *Mt* 19, 21) that she “go and sell all her goods and strive to distribute them to the poor” (*RCl* 2, 8; Cf. *2R* 2, 5). This evangelical word is at the base of what these two lovers of the Poor and Crucified Christ consider the charismatic word *par excellence*, the point of reference for their evangelical experience, the fundamental option that inspires the decision to live according to “the perfection of the Holy Gospel” (*FVC* 1; cf. *RCl* 6, 3), the word that orients and illuminates their next steps.

Both the *Poverello* and his *Little Plant*, choosing to live *sine proprio*, are inspired by the love of Christ, the Poor One *par excellence* (cf. *2LF* 4-5; *2Cel* 16. 55. 61. 73-74; *TestCl* 45). From Him they learned renunciation, abasement in its most radical and absolute form (cf. *2Cel* 83-85). For them, having a deep relationship with Jesus Christ presumes living *sine proprio*. On the other hand, for both of them the first and last meaning of poverty, of living *sine proprio*, is bearing witness that God is the true wealth of the human heart (cf. *PrG* 4; *TestCl* 43-44, 47).⁴⁰

If Francis remained faithful to the meaning of his gesture of stripping himself in front of his father Pietro Bernardone (*1Cel* 6, 15), Clare was faithful, to the final consequences, to the *Last Will* of Francis: “I, little Brother Francis, wish to follow the life and poverty of our most high Lord Jesus Christ and of His most holy Mother and to persevere in this until the end, and I ask you, my ladies, and I give you my advice that you live always in this most holy life and poverty” (*LastWill* 1-3). She herself affirms it in her *Rule* when she writes: “And I, together with my sisters, have ever been solicitous to safeguard the holy pov-

40 Cf. *VC* 90

erty which we have promised the Lord God and blessed Francis" (RCl 6, 10). This is attested also by Jacques de Vitry when, in contrast to what he encountered in the Curia, he speaks of the Lesser Brothers and the Lesser Sisters as those who renounce all property for Christ.⁴¹

30. In this context of fidelity to that decision we can place the request for the *Privilege of Poverty* presented to Gregory IX, and which Clare obtains from the Pope on 17 September 1228. The original of this *Privilege* is preserved in the Protomonastery of Assisi, witnessing to the fidelity of what Clare promised to the Lord and to Francis. Even though we do not know the form in which the petition was presented to the Pope, it is still significant to note the reason given to justify this Privilege: "As is evident, you have renounced the desire for all temporal things, desiring to dedicate yourselves to the Lord alone. Because of this, since you have sold all things and given them to the poor, you propose not to have any possessions whatsoever, clinging in all things to the footprints of Him, the Way, the Truth, and the Life Who, for our sake was made poor" (1PrivP 2-3). Christ and following Him is the first and last reason for Clare's poverty. With good reason, Blessed John Paul II called her "the passionate lover of the poor, crucified Christ, with whom she wants to identify absolutely."⁴² Clare, the Christian woman, like Francis, wished to possess nothing, but rather chose to live *sine proprio* in order to possess the One who is All. The poverty of Clare is, above all, a question of relationship.

This was her desire from the earliest years of her life, when she passed from the

41 J. Vitry, in *Francis of Assisi, Early Documents: The Saint*, New City, New York 1999, 578 ff.

42 John Paul II, *Letter to the Poor Clares for the VIII Centenary of the Birth of St. Clare* (1993).

noble class of the knights to the social class of the “*vilis*” [worthless] and servants: “*to be a virgin and to live in poverty.*”⁴³ The giving of her goods in obedience to the Gospel (cf. *Lk* 18, 22; *Mt* 19, 21) and to Francis “*is the key to entering the Franciscan evangelical path. It is part of the process of enlightenment and the first steps in the conversion*” of Clare. It is like “*a foundational gesture for all those who are called, the Franciscan sacrament, as it were.*”⁴⁴

In Francis, and certainly also in Clare, living *without anything of one's own* is clearly related to spiritual and material goods. Francis, enlightened by faith, discovers God as “*the fullness of good, all good, every good, the true and supreme good*” (1R 23, 9). And since all goods proceed from the Lord, all should be returned to Him: “*And let us refer all good to the most high and supreme lord God, and acknowledge that every good is His, and thank Him for everything, [He] from Whom all good things come*” (1R 17, 17). In reference to material goods, for Francis God is their only proprietor, and the human being simply a vassal before God, who must place in the hands of his Lord all that he has (cf. *Adm* 19; *LM* 7, 7). While sin is appropriation, restitution is the cause of blessedness (cf. *Adm* 11).

We cannot understand the life of Francis or Clare without this radical option for living *without anything of one's own*, just as we cannot understand, from the experience of the Poverello and his Little Plant, the contemplation of the mystery of the Incarnation without a radical option for total renunciation. For Francis and Clare the formula “*sine proprio*” was not merely a formula of renunciation of some material goods, but the expression of a total, radical disappropriation.

43 *Process* XIX, 2.

44 María Victoria Triviño, *Clara de Asís ante el Espejo. Historia y Espiritualidad*. Edc. Paulinas, Madrid 1991, 69.

*The Lesser Brothers and Poor Sisters,
Called to Live sine proprio*

31. Like Francis and Clare, the Lesser Brothers and Poor Sisters of today are called to live *without anything of their own*. This must be a firm point for the Brothers and Sisters, particularly in these times dominated by consumerism. Fidelity to the Rule and Form of Life professed by the Brothers and the Sisters entails fidelity to poverty, to living *sine proprio*. It is significant that Clare defines the form of life as “*the form of our poverty*” (RCl 4, 5-6). Such is the concern of Francis and Clare for poverty that they constantly insist on never departing from it (Cf. *Last Will*, 1-3; *TestCl* 35. 44-45.47), as this would mean departing from the Poor and Crucified Christ.

Brothers and Sisters: What does all of this tell us? What concrete issues are presented to us in this radical option of Francis and Clare to live *without anything of one's own*? How are we to live and render legible our option for *sine proprio*? How do we preserve this treasure that is part of the great legacy of Francis and Clare?

One thing is obvious: it by living *sine proprio* that we open ourselves, we listen to and welcome the Other and the others, without any intention, hidden or open, to manipulate them; this is how we can live obedience, especially *loving obedience*, and chastity, in that it allows us to love gratuitously, without seeking any recompense; it is how we can really live the Gospel and have the same attitude as Christ who, being rich, stripped Himself of everything and took on the humility of our condition.

The vow to live *with nothing of one's own*, having allowed us to encounter the One

who is “*riches to sufficiency*” (cf. *PrG* 4), allows us to be free persons: free from the drive to accumulate, free from the insatiable thirst to have the most, the best and the fastest possible, and, in this way, to allow us to distinguish what is useful from what is necessary and what is superfluous. The vow to *live without anything of one’s own* makes us *itinerants*, without appropriating house, or work, or results; it leads us to discover the gratuity of our work with all that implies; to live according to the *logic of gift and service*, as prophecy in action against a logic of consumption, price, profit, and power. The vow to *live without anything of one’s own* helps us to create new, alternative relationships in the society in which we live, and transforms us into a prophetic voice in this world dominated by consumerism.⁴⁵

Furthermore, poverty bears fruit when it is transformed into solidarity, since only then is it the poverty of Jesus, who became poor in order to enrich us by His poverty (cf. *2Cor* 8, 9). Jesus did not share with us, His brothers and sisters, what was superfluous or unnecessary: He shared His very life. Thus the Poor Sister are to share not just what is superfluous but even that which is indispensable (cf. *LCl* 15). It is good in this context to recall what Clare wrote: “*What a great laudable exchange: to leave the things of time for those of eternity, to choose the things of heaven for the goods of earth, to receive the hundred-fold in place of one, and to possess a blessed and eternal life*” (*1LCl* 30).

32. Dear Brothers and Sisters: today more than ever we are asked to be signs of hope, specifically in this time when humanity is experiencing a profound crisis that touches every aspect of life. In this context it is ur-

45 Cf. *CdC* 22.

gent for us to have, like Francis and Clare, a style of life that is sober, with only the essentials, “*the radicalism of poverty associated with total trust in Divine Providence.*”⁴⁶

The poor call to us, asking of us external signs of a life that is consistently simple, and a clear option for radical poverty lived in an evangelical manner, and expressed with a prophetic spirit, so that they can sense the closeness of God. We are called, Brothers and Sisters, to place ourselves in a permanently precarious situation, freeing ourselves of everything that does not protect relationships with oneself, with others, with God, with things, and with Creation. Following the logic of restitution, as Brothers and Sisters we are invited to make credible the option for what is essential.

33. Finally, the sense of justice also calls to us. The cry of the poor cannot leave Lesser Brothers and Poor Sisters indifferent. In the *OSC Constitutions* it is written in regard to the witness of a poor life: “*In every way of life, both individual and communal, the Sisters should give witness to poverty and in a spirit of solidarity conform to the style of life of much of humanity that lives in the world in uncomfortable conditions.*”⁴⁷ For their part, the Lesser Brothers’ *Constitutions* say: “*In order that they may follow more closely and express more clearly the self-emptying of the Saviour, the friars are to have the life and condition of the little ones in society, always living among them as minors. In this social environment they are to work for the coming of the Kingdom*” (cf. *GGCC OFM*, 66, 1).

The world needs witnesses, people who by the grace of God give themselves totally; the world needs people who are “*capable of*

46 Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, 15/09/2010.

47 *General Constitutions OSC* 153, 3.

accepting the abnegation of poverty, and of being attracted by simplicity and humility; it is that of those who love peace, who are free from compromise and set on complete self-denial -- of those who are at the same time free and obedient, spontaneous and tenacious, meek and strong in the certainty of the Faith."⁴⁸ Our world needs Lesser Brothers and Poor Sisters like that.



How do I personally live *sine proprio* and how does my fraternity live *sine proprio*?

Is our choice of poverty understandable to those around us, or does it require a lot of explanation?

If living *sine proprio* is the wellspring of true evangelical freedom, am I really free?

In order for me to be free, what am I lacking and what is extra?

48 *Evangelica Testificatio* 31.



Mission

Some clarifications

34. Dear Sisters and Brothers: another essential element of our Form of Life is mission. But here we need to make some clarifications. The first clarification is this: when we speak of mission we are talking about something more than pastoral activities.

Mission goes beyond concrete apostolic works, since it expresses three different dimensions of our life, all of which is called to be a proclamation of the Kingdom of God. So we can well say that mission is at the very heart of consecrated life⁴⁹ and of the Franciscan/Clarian Form of Life. Our charism, like every charism, is a gift of the Spirit for the good of the entire Church, that it may grow in its journey of faith, building a true fraternity, and carrying out the mission of witnessing and proclaiming the Kingdom.

Another clarification seems of fundamental importance to me: vocation and mission always go hand-in-hand. One cannot be separated from the other. For this reason, as we have already said, mission is one of the indispensable elements of any consecrated life, including the life of the Poor Sisters. Mission is the key to understanding the Church as well as consecrated life, including contemplative life.⁵⁰ Consecrated life, Franciscan/Clarian

49 “[M]ission is the Church’s way of being and, within her, of the consecrated life. It is part of your identity.” Benedict XVI, *Audience for Superiors General*, 26 November, 2010.

50 In this case we can speak of a mission of witness that is shown through prayer, transmitting faith in the Absolute, showing openness to transcendence, making visible the evangelical life, contemplative silence, fraternal life, poverty ... Thus, contemplative life is “a support for the weak members of the Church,” as Saint Clare would say (*3LCI* 8).

life, cannot turn in on itself, on its internal and external problems. Consecrated life, our life, cannot allow itself to be paralyzed by these problems. Our contemporaries want to see Jesus (*Jn* 12, 21). As Franciscans and Poor Clares we cannot fail to hear this cry.

A third clarification is that the mission of consecrated life and our Franciscan/Clarian life is the mission of the Church. This means that even when it is ours, it goes beyond the limits of our Orders. This mission, nevertheless, sinks its roots in the God who is Trinity, by Whose loving plan we are included in the same divine mission. In this manner mission arises from the experience of a God who is communion and communication, who is love and who fills us with that love, which overflows in us and wishes to express itself. In this way, the *missio Ecclesiae* is a participation in the *missio Dei*.

Our mission

35. At this point we must ask ourselves: in what does our mission consist? In the recent theology of consecrated life one conviction appears clearly: the mission of religious life is simply to be religious and consecrated life. This conviction follows the same direction as *Vita consecrata* when it affirms: “by the action of the Holy Spirit who is at the origin of every vocation and charism, consecrated life itself is a mission, as was the whole of Jesus’ life.”⁵¹ There is the key to understanding the mission not only of the Poor Sisters, as contemplatives in the Church and the world, but also that of the Lesser Brothers. Nothing can take precedence over this witness of life. It is the true mission, and without it there can only be indoctrination or training, but there will never be mission.

51 *VC* 72.

As we said earlier, mission cannot be understood only in terms of doing. Consecrated life in general and Franciscan/Clarian life in particular, are characterized above all by their being, their charismatic nature.⁵² This means that our first contribution to the *missio Ecclesiae*, to the *missio Dei*, is that of deepening the theological dimension of our life or, if you wish, centering ourselves in God and in His plan. Only on this basis can the relevance of apostolic works themselves be recreated.

It will be the experience of God which will bring us closer to the center of persons, oblige us to hear their cries, especially those of the poor, and to consider ourselves in solidarity with their searching, appreciating the wealth of responses that persons find along their journey. The experience of God -- even the experience of God in a contemplative life like yours, my dear Poor Sisters -- always takes place in a concrete context and, precisely for this reason, should sense that it is subject to the questions and questioning which arise from it. In this sense the experience of God puts us in solidarity with the doubts and the searching of others and makes of us true *mendicants of meaning*.

This leads us to affirm another important contribution we make to the *missio Ecclesiae*, to the *missio Dei*, and which is a consequence of what we have just said: to take dialogue not simply as a *method* for carrying out our mission, but as the *proper place* of mission. This presumes, above all, making the concerns of the people our own, to be fully immersed in the questions that fill people's

52 A grave error of religious life has been that of confusing charisms with apostolic works. In this sense, religious life should step back from such activism, functionalism, so many pastoral commitments, so much institutional thinking, in order to rediscover its charismatic core. It must return to its essence, to its origins.

lives, and seeking together answers that can give meaning to this moment of history. We Lesser Brothers do this, carrying the message of Jesus in our hearts, in our actions and in our words. You, my beloved Poor Sisters, do this above all by presenting to the Lord through the prayer of intercession these same concerns, as well as by listening and sympathizing with the people of our times.

Thus, *centered* in the Lord, *concentrating* on the priorities of our Franciscan/Clarian life, we will *de-center* ourselves from ourselves, in order to direct our attention to the life and reality of the world, returning in this way to *center ourselves* much more in the “*the Father’s business*” (Lk 2, 49), and offering a creative fidelity and a new language that allows us to share the incomparable and enduring riches of the Gospel message.

The specific character of Clarian mission

36. Keeping in mind the form of life which you have embraced, my dear Poor Sisters, your mission consists in recalling to people today that only one thing is necessary, God; being those who point toward transcendence; living properly the elements that make up your vocation. If the mission of consecrated life consists basically in “courageously to propose anew the enterprising initiative, creativity and holiness” of our Founders, “in response to the signs of the times emerging in today’s world,”⁵³ and to return the gift of the Gospel to our contemporaries,⁵⁴ then an evangelical life like

53 VC 37.

54 In evangelizing mission the concern is this: to return the gift we have received, the Gospel, which in its most profound essence is a gift destined to be shared. Mission springs from the very depths of the Gospel. A life touched by the dynamism of the Gospel becomes overflowing passion for the Kingdom, even within the

yours is, in itself, mission. This life will be that which allows a Poor Sister to live, even within the enclosure, with *sympathy* toward the world, in the sense indicated by the term; that which makes it possible to enter into dialogue with the men and women of today in order to evangelize them, without signifying that this means conforming oneself to the world, nor to suspend critical judgment toward it. *Sympathy* as we are using it will lead a daughter of Saint Clare rather to have a positive outlook on the context and the culture surrounding her, discovering in its reality unforeseen opportunities for grace which the Lord offers for mission. In this way mission will be a journey of going and coming that involves giving but also receiving, in an attitude of fruitful and constructive dialogue.

This does not mean that the mission of a Poor Clare sister is not enfolded in the reality of our world or does not take into account the situation of society. Clare, while remaining in stability and enclosure, is no stranger to the problems, the anxieties and concerns of her contemporaries, of the Church and the city of Assisi (cf. *Proc* 6). Clare is no mere spectator of history, but one who participates actively in it by means of prayer and intercession. Also today you as Poor Sisters are called to place yourselves in an attitude of listening to the dramas of our time, receiving in your own hearts the deep questions of the men and women of today so as to entrust them to God.

Shared mission: the relation of the OFM to the OSC and viceversa

37. Today, when we speak of mission we

enclosure. A heart transformed by the power of the Gospel transforms one necessarily into a missionary, even while living in enclosure.

always speak of the need for shared mission. This is where we need to go deeper, Sisters and Brothers, considering the topic of the relations between the OFM Brothers and the OSC Sisters.

Since this is not the specific purpose of my conversation with you, Brothers and Sisters, I will rather put forward some questions that put us in a position of *free and disinterested seeking* and that move us to reflection. I do this beginning with the text of Benedict XVI cited earlier, and then continuing with some other texts. The Pope says: *"It was beside this little church [San Damiano], which Francis restored after his conversion, that Clare and her first companions established their community, living on prayer and humble tasks. They were called the "Poor Sisters" and their "form of life" was the same as that of the Friars Minor: "To observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ,"⁵⁵ preserving the union of reciprocal charity (RCl 10, 7) and observing in particular the poverty and humility of Jesus and of his Most Holy Mother (RCl 12, 13)."*⁵⁶ What meaning do these words of the Holy Father contain for the Poor Sisters and Lesser Brothers, in the concrete circumstances of life? What consequences would follow from what Celano writes, namely that *"One and the same Spirit had led the brothers and those poor little ladies out of this world?"* (2Cel 204) What does it mean for the Poor Sisters when Clare writes in the Rule: *"And let them quickly arrange to have the Minister General or the Minister Provincial of the Order of Lesser Brothers present. Through the Word of God, let him dispose them to perfect harmony and the common good in the election (referring to the election of the abbess) to be held"* (RCl 4, 3). What does it mean, and how to live out today the obedience that Clare and her Sis-

55 RCl 1, 2.

56 Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, 10 August 2011.

ters *freely* promised to Francis and his successors? (cf. *RCl* 4-5; *TestCl* 25). What does it mean and how to live out concretely today, both by the Brothers and the Sisters, what Clare asks in her Testament (*TestCl* 50-51)? What practical consequences follow for the relations between the OSC and the OFM considering the recommendation of Clare to Agnes, to prefer the advice of the Minister General to that of all others? (cf. *2LCl* 15ff). And for the Lesser Brothers, how to be faithful to the promise to Clare that Francis made, for himself and his Brothers, to show toward the Sisters loving care and special solicitude (cf. *RCl* 6, 4)?

38. Leaving open these and other questions to a response that will be fruit of deep reflection and, to the degree possible, of consensus, I am convinced that this is a topic we must continue developing, without fear on your part, my dear Poor Clare Sisters, and without a leadership role for us Franciscan men that would be out of place, distinguishing the charismatic element from the juridical dimension, but taking concrete steps that show the complementarity and mutuality between the Poor Sisters and the Lesser Brothers, their belonging to the same fraternity;⁵⁷ concrete steps that will lead us to a greater communion, with respect for the rightful and healthy differences that exist between a life that is entirely contemplative and a life which, without ceasing to be contemplative, is also apostolic.

39. The texts of Clare, not just those we have cited but many others, like those of the Testament, in which she constantly refers to the *blessed father Francis* (*TestCl* 5. 7- 14. 17-18, 24-40. 42. 46-51. 57. 75. 77), allow us to af-

57 Cf. Chiara Frugoni, *Storia di Chiara e Francesco*. Einaudi, Torino 2011, 86ff.

firm confidently that the *Poverello* was very important for his *Little Plant*, and central in her spiritual experience. The texts of Francis are not so explicit, but there can no doubt about the importance that the fraternity of San Damiano had for him, as demonstrated by several of his Writings: the Form of Life that he wrote for them (cf. *FVCl*), the Norms on fasting for the Sisters (cf. *NACl*), the Exhortation sung to Clare and her Sisters (cf. *ExhCl*), and, above all, the promise he made to care for the Sisters as he cared for the Brothers (cf. *RCl* 6, 3-5). It is important to note a detail: frequently Clare joins the name of God to that of Francis, as if to tell us that she recognizes the presence of God in all that Francis reveals to her.

In any case this concerns a relationship extended to the Brothers and the Sisters that is to be viewed within the fraternal dimension that animates and expresses the spirituality of Francis and Clare, and which can illuminate not only the relationship of Francis and Clare, but also the relationship of the Brothers to the Sisters, and viceversa. The relationship of Francis and Clare, and consequently of the Brothers and Sisters, is always a relationship with three parts: he/Brothers-she/Sisters and, always, the Lord. Clare and Francis grasp within their profoundly human relationship the singular presence of God. Their mutual relationship, to my way of thinking full of fraternal affection, is always in reference to God, discovered in the midst of them both, though in different ways, in the relationship itself.⁵⁸ I believe that we can say without any fear that the relationship of Francis and Clare, both fraternal and friendly, is the *place* of relationship with God for both of them.

58 Cesare Vaiani, *Francesco e Chiara d'Assisi. Analisi del loro rapporto nelle fonti biografiche e negli scritti*, Glossa, Milano 2004, 123.

From the relationship of Francis and Clare it is easy to understand when one says that consecrated life is a matter of outlook. In fact, with Francis and Clare we have a clear example of an authentically human experience lived from an outlook of faith that makes that experience surprisingly fruitful, and which allows the birth within the relationship itself, and always in faith, of the magnificent and beautiful perception of a greater presence, that of the Lord, leading both to follow the footprints of the Son, turning every gaze toward the *Father of mercies*. When two human beings, in this case a man and a woman, feel they are loved by the Lord and discover their love in Him, nothing can tarnish their relationship. All of it points to and speaks of the Lord who created them in His *image and likeness* (cf. *Gn* 1, 27). “*God looked at everything he had made, and found it very good*” (*Gn* 1, 31)!

To corroborate what we are saying we may recall that Francis reads the relationship with the Sisters in a Trinitarian key: they are daughters of the Father, sisters in the Son; spouses in the Spirit. In this way -- and this seems simply wonderful to me -- the relationship of Francis and Clare, Brothers and Sisters, enters fully into the Christian revelation of God. This leads us to emphasize another key to reading the relationships between Francis and Clare and the Sisters with the Brothers: the Marian key. Mary is, for the minstrel of the Virgin made Church, the daughter of the Father, mother of the Son, spouse of the Holy Spirit (cf. *OfP*, *Antiphon Holy Virgin Mary*; *SalVM* 1ff).

40. Sisters and Brothers: let us walk hand-in-hand, deeply united in the Lord, for only in this way will we be able to restore the house of the Lord, the Church: the Sisters with a life that is entirely contemplative, the

Brothers as missionaries in the cloister of the world, with their hearts always turned toward the Lord; and both living in fraternity and minority. Is this not perhaps what the world and the Church itself expect of us?



How do I live the connection of vocation and mission?

What do you understand by mission? In what place do you put apostolic works and what place do you give to witness?

How do I live the shared mission OFM-OSC?

What is lacking in that relationship for it to be a *signum fraternitatis* and what is sufficient?

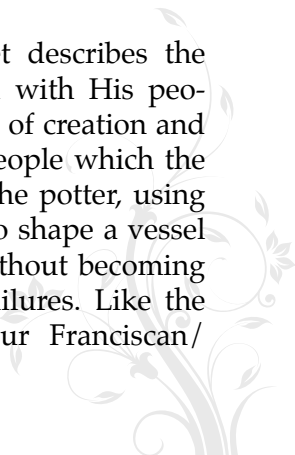




ON A JOURNEY

41. Dear Sisters, Dear Brothers: before concluding this fraternal conversation with each of you, I would like us to read together some texts that can help us to live in a Franciscan way these times that are ours to live. The first text is a “*parable in action*” of the Prophet Jeremiah: *“This word came to Jeremiah from the Lord: Arise and go down to the potter’s house; there you will hear my word. I went down to the potter’s house and there he was, working at the wheel. Whenever the vessel of clay he was making turned out badly in his hand, he tried again, making another vessel of whatever sort he pleased. Then the word of the Lord came to me: Can I not do to you, house of Israel, as this potter has done?—oracle of the Lord. Indeed, like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, house of Israel.”* (cf. Jr. 18, 1-6)

The text of the prophet describes the loving relationship of God with His people, and the patient process of creation and re-creation of the chosen people which the divine Potter carries out. The potter, using the same material, is able to shape a vessel according to his design, without becoming discouraged by possible failures. Like the vessel, consecrated life, our Franciscan/



Clarian life, must allow itself to be re-created in order to respond better to God's plan for it. In this moment what is most urgent and is constantly asked of us is to allow ourselves to be made and remade constantly, since only in this way will we be able to respond to the plan God has for us.

42. A second text is from Eduardo Galeano. To my mind it exemplifies very well the process of transformation that religious life and Franciscan/Clarian life is going through.⁵⁹ It reads: "*On the shores of another sea, an old potter retires. His eyes cloud over, his hands tremble, the hour to say goodbye has arrived. Then the ceremony of initiation begins: the old potter offers the young potter his best piece. And the young potter doesn't keep that perfect vase to contemplate or admire: he smashes it on the ground, breaks it into a thousand pieces, picks up the pieces, and incorporates them into his own clay.*"

In these times of profound transformation and re-founding, I do not think I am exaggerating if I say that many times this beautiful vessel we have inherited (the concrete ways of living the Franciscan-Clarian charism) will have to be broken, not because it came out poorly, but because the circumstances have changed so much that the present wineskins can no longer hold the good wine of our charism. Only in this way will we be able to live a new stage in this marvelous adventure in which God has willed that we participate. Does not this attitude have much to do with Franciscan itinerancy, which is valid also for you, my dear Poor Sisters of Saint Clare? Does this not have much to do with living with nothing

⁵⁹ The text is cited by Alvaro Rodríguez Echeverría, *Prophecy of the Loving Existence and Presence of God in Consecrated Life*, Union of Superiors General, May 2011.

of one's own as we promised on the day of our profession?

We are called to live this moment that is ours to live as a wonderful and surprising moment, even though not necessarily an easy one, in which we must open ourselves to the Spirit which, like the wind, "*blows and we cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going*" (Jn 3, 8). We cannot turn ourselves in on the past, no matter how beautiful the vessel. Nor can we take on, uncritically, all that comes to us from present-day culture, since not everything is compatible with our Form of Life. This implies opening ourselves to the future with hope, based on a *re-visiting* of our identity, in such a way that, without renouncing what is non-negotiable, we may be able to respond with creativity to the changing reality in which we live.

What is non-negotiable are the evangelical values that gave rise to the Franciscan/Clarian charism, and which constitute the foundations of our identity. The creativity that is asked of us is also evangelical, since it will help us to respond to the saving will of God in Jesus Christ, who wishes that "*they might have life and have it more abundantly*" (Jn 10, 10). What is asked of us in these times, my dear Sisters and Brothers, is continuity with the constitutive values of our Form of Life, and discontinuity, remembering the historical context in which we live. In this way we will avoid falling into an ahistorical essentialism or an existentialism without any roots. This means living an identity in process.

43. The third text is from the Prophet Ezekiel, also well known among us. It says: "*Therefore, prophesy and say to them: Thus says the Lord God: Look! I am going to open your graves; I will make you come up out of your*

graves, my people, and bring you back to the land of Israel. You shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and make you come up out of them, my people! I will put my spirit in you that you may come to life, and I will settle you in your land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord. I have spoken; I will do it—oracle of the Lord” (Ez 37, 12-14).

Living lucidly with our own frailty, repositioning our plan of life on the foundations of clay and global poverty, and starting with an initial situation of need, a situation marked by not-knowing and not-being-able, we must allow ourselves to be shaped by the Lord, who, with the craftsman’s patience, will keep transforming us into *His image and likeness* and will infuse us with His breath of life. He will renew our strength (cf. *Is 40, 30-31*).

44. Our God is the God of life, and of life in abundance, who transforms death into life and fulness of life. To this God, in whom I believe and we believe, I entrust our present and our future. Our present and our future, if they are to have meaning, must promote a Franciscan/Clarian life with these characteristics:

- it is ready to be born anew (cf. *Jn 3, 3*), in a constant attitude of conversion, and based on a logic of what is essential.
- it visits and creates spiritual oases, sacred spaces of the infinite.
- it is able to communicate the beauty of following Jesus Christ, based on a sense of belonging unconditionally to Him.
- it has a meaning because of its evangelical quality of life and mission, a visible memorial of Jesus’ way of living and acting.

- it takes up once again the Gospel as its rule and life, and seeks its freshness and deepest newness.
- it is based on a profound spirituality of community, and creates bridges for encountering the other, and the one who is different, becoming builders of dialogue based on an option and style of life.
- it allows itself to be seduced by the *in-human cloisters*, and places itself at the side of fragility and vulnerability as the essence of its identity and a consequence of its faith in the Incarnation of the Word.
- it is based on fidelity to its deepest identity and its rich history, it opens itself with hope to the future, impelled by the Spirit, making itself present in the present moment, living it with passion and in an attitude of *adventus*, experiencing in this way the presence and the coming of the Lord.
- it opts for transparency and credibility, and in order to understand better the demands of its vocation and mission, remains in a constant state of *seeking* paths and wells, in ongoing discernment, adopting attitudes of sincere humility, of listening, docility, poverty and the urgency of rekindling hearts and spreading the charity of Christ.
- it takes as proper to its mission, in profound communion with the Lord and with the men and women of our time, allowing itself to be burned in order to spread light, passion for holiness and for humanity.
- it is more Franciscan and more Clarian, more evangelical, poorer, more fraternal, more missionary.

May Mary, the Virgin made Church, accompany us, as Mother and Teacher, in this journey which is both fascinating and not always easy. And may the blessing of our Seraphic Parents, Francis and Clare, also accompany us.

Fraternally, your brother, Minister and servant

Rome 15 July 2012
Feast of St. Bonaventure
Doctor of the Church

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ABBREVIATIONS

*Writings of Saint Francis and
of Saint Clare of Assisi*

<i>Adm</i>	Admonitions.
<i>Aud</i>	“Audite, poverelle”
<i>Cant</i>	Canticle of the Creatures,
<i>Fior</i>	Fioretti, Little Flowers of St Francis.
<i>LAnt</i>	Letter to Anthony.
<i>LastWill</i>	Last Will.
<i>LLeo</i>	Letter to Leo.
<i>LMin</i>	Letter to a Minister.
<i>LtrOrd</i>	Letter to the Entire Order.
<i>1LtrF</i>	First Letter to the Faithful.
<i>2LtrF</i>	Second Letter to the Faithful.
<i>OrSD</i>	Prayer before the Crucifix of San Damiano.
<i>OfP</i>	Office of the Passion of the Lord.
<i>PrG</i>	Praises of God.
<i>1R</i>	First Rule.
<i>2R</i>	Second Rule.
<i>SalVM</i>	Salutation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.
<i>Test</i>	Testament.
<i>BICl</i>	Blessing of Clare
<i>RCl</i>	Rule of Saint Clare
<i>1LCl</i>	First Letter of Saint Clare to Ag- nes of Prague.
<i>2LCl</i>	Second Letter of Saint Clare to Agnes of Prague.

3LCI	Third Letter of Saint Clare to Agnes of Prague.
4LCI	Fourth Letter of Saint Clare to Agnes of Prague.
LegCl	Legend of Clare.
LM	Legenda maior of Saint Bonaventure.
LP	Legend of Perugia.
TestCl	Testament of Clare.

Other abbreviations

Cdc	Instruction of the Congregation for Consecrated Life, <i>Caminar desde Cristo</i> [<i>Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium</i>] (19 May 2002).
ET	Paul VI, <i>Evangelica Testificatio</i> , Apostolic Exhortation on the Renewal of Religious Life according to the teaching of the Council (29 June 1971).
DV	Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution <i>Dei Verbum</i> on divine revelation (18 November 1965).
GG.CC.	General Constitutions of the Order of Friars Minor, Rome, 2010.
GG.CC OSC	General Constitutions of the Order of Saint Clare, Rome, 1988.
NMI	John Paul II, <i>Novo Millennio Ineunte</i> , Apostolic Letter on the Conclusion of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 (6 January 2001).
Pf	<i>Benedict XVI, Porta Fidei</i> , Apostolic Letter in form of Motu Proprio (11 October 2011).
SAO	Instruction of the Congregation for Consecrated Life, <i>The Service of Authority and Obedience</i> (11 May 2008).

- VC John Paul II, *Vita consecrata*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on consecrated life and its mission in the Church and the world (25 March 1996).
- VFC Document of the Congregation for Consecrated Life, *Vida fraterna en comunidad* [Fraternal Life in Community] (2 February 1994).
- VD Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church (30 September 2010).



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