

Francis, Clare, and the Great Chain of Being

During the lifetimes of Francis and Clare in the high Middle Ages, the ‘Great Chain of Being’ defined people’s understanding of the universe. This medieval (and late classical) concept understood the universe in a hierarchical (vertical) structure. It viewed the spiritual heavens separated from and above the material earth. In the heavens, God reigned on top with the angels and saints subordinate to him. In the earth (the material world) humans were on top, with animals, plants, and stones underneath them in that order. Each level had many sub-levels, too many to list here.

People were strictly ranked hierarchically and sub-divided according to class and profession, which determined how they related to one another. It was not unlike the caste system of India still alive today. One’s class was mostly determined by the class of his father, and was difficult to change. One always served someone higher in rank, and was served, in turn, by someone of lower rank. This is feudalism. Essentially people were in one of two categories: noble or common. The nobility was ruled on top by an emperor or monarch (king or queen); then were dukes, marquises, counts, barons, and finally knights – in that order. The commoners were divided into a middle class and lower class. The middle class consisted of the merchants, shopkeepers, and tradesmen. The lower class were soldiers/town watchmen, household servants, peasants (farmers), shepherds, beggars, thieves, marginalized (lepers, diseased, crippled), and finally criminals of serious offenses. Underneath the created world was the spiritual underworld. This was not created by God as part of the heavens and the earth; rather, it was a place where the fallen angels went after they disobeyed God. It was ruled by Lucifer and demons. The Church had its own ranking system all to its own, and was somewhat separate from that the secular world, but inter-related. On top was the Pope, then cardinals (after the 10th century), archbishops, bishops, abbots, archpriests, priests, deacons, sub-deacons, monks, nuns, oblates, third order laypersons, penitents, and finally lay faithful.

The influence of this worldview on people during Francis’s and Clare’s times cannot be overemphasized. People were keenly aware of the class to which they and others belonged. According to the ways of the natural world, one sought to go up the ladder, never down. Before Francis’s conversion, he sought to move up the ladder from the merchant class to the nobility by becoming a knight. When Francis sought out war the second time (to become a knight), he had a dream in Spoleto (about 60 miles south of Assisi). A voice (God) asked him if it was better to serve the Lord or a servant. Francis (according to the great chain of being) responded that it was better to serve someone higher, not lower. The voice then asked him why he was serving servants and then told him to go back to Assisi. Afterwards, Francis began to reflect on how he had been misguided. A short time later, he left everything and began serving the poor, especially the lepers – the lowliest of humanity. Clare, on the other hand, was always holy, even as a child; she and the women in her family often served the poor, albeit from their privileged household. So it seems that Clare did not undergo a radical conversion like Francis. However, she did leave her family’s wealth and noble privileges in order to follow Francis in complete poverty. After Clare left her household, she entered a Benedictine convent for mostly noble-born women. An important point to note is that in the convents of Clare’s day, nuns of noble birth were served by nuns of low birth. But Clare entered the convent with nothing – as a lowborn commoner. She chose to enter as a servant! Eventually, she lived in San Damiano outside the city walls where the poor lived.

Why did Francis and Clare live this way? They were dedicating their lives to Christian *minoritas*. This is a word they both used in their writings, and is even part of the name of Francis’s order (order of friars *minor*); it was also an early name for Clare’s order, as well. It means “lesserness,” but could also be defined as humility, poverty, trust, obedience, etc. Why did Francis and Clare dedicate themselves to minority, poverty and lesserness? *Because they were imitating God, who is minor*. They chose to live as “minors” because they observed God as a “minor.”

“Though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, and took the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross! Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2: 6-11) Francis and Clare observed that God, in an act of divine humility, had emptied himself of the glories of Heaven in order to assume

lesser human flesh. He chose to be born to poor parents – Joseph was a carpenter who worked with his hands. Working with one’s hands in Francis’s and Clare’s day was something the commoners did. Jesus frequently associated with tax collectors and prostitutes – the lowliest of Palestinian society. And finally, Jesus went to the cross to die as a convicted criminal – the lowliest place possible. And, even after his death, he went down to the lowest place possible – into Hell (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 632-637). But these were not just historical one-time events. God still allows himself to become transformed into bread and wine for us. He does all this out of love! This is from Francis’s First Admonition: “See, daily He humbles Himself (cf. Phil 2:8) as when He came from the royal throne (Wis 18:15) into the womb of the Virgin; daily He comes to us in a humble form; daily He comes down from the bosom of the Father upon the altar in the hands of the priest. And as He appeared to the holy apostles in true flesh, so now He reveals Himself to us in the sacred bread.”

Francis and Clare believed that the kingdom of Heaven lies in *minoritas* and humility. They (especially Francis) recognized that by trying to propel themselves ‘up’ the ladder, they were set in conflict with the world. They realized that relating to the world by trying to go up the ladder did not bring peace. Francis had twice sought to become a knight, but ended up imprisoned for a year and depressed. After his conversion, he began seeking the ways of God and embracing *minoritas*. He chose to go *down* the ladder to serve the lowliest of society – the lepers. That is when he understood the difference between earthly and heavenly rewards. Up until that point he had been seeking earthly rewards and glories; but when he finally embraced *minoritas* and humility, he began receiving heavenly rewards.

Francis sought to imitate Christ out of obedience. He saw that Christ had emptied himself of the glories of heaven out of obedience to his Father. So for Francis, obedience meant emptying himself of all earthly glories, honors, privileges, and wealth. Francis wrote in his Earlier Rule, chapter XI: “All the brothers should strive to follow the humility and the poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ and remember that we should have nothing else in the whole world except, as the Apostle says, having something to eat and something to wear, we be content with these (cf 1 Tim 6:8). And they must rejoice when they live among people [considered] of little worth and who are looked down upon, among the poor and the powerless, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside. And when it may be necessary, let them go for alms. And they should not be ashamed, but rather recall that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the living and all-powerful God set His face like flint and was not ashamed. And He was a poor man and a transient and lived on alms, He and the Blessed Virgin, and His disciples.”

Clare sought to be poor in order to imitate God, whom she viewed as poor. She wrote in her first letter to Agnes of Prague, “O blessed poverty who bestows eternal riches on those who love and embrace her! O holy poverty to those who possess and desire you God promises the kingdom of heaven and offers indeed eternal glory and blessed life!... Contempt of the world has pleased You more than its honors, poverty more than earthly riches, and You have stored up greater treasures in heaven rather than on earth, where rust does not consume nor moth destroy nor thieves break in and steal (Mt 6:20). Your reward, then, is very great in heaven! (Mt 5:12)

Francis and Clare chose to go down in the world – to become minor – in order to be lifted up by the Holy Spirit into the kingdom of heaven. Their poverty allowed them to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Only by going down (as Jesus did when he left the glories of Heaven to go all the way down to the cross and eventually into Hell) did Francis and Clare experience the true kingdom of heaven. When Francis and Clare sought to live like Christ in humility, poverty, trust, obedience, they experienced the grace of God and the true kingdom of heaven. When they lived like the world and sought out the opposite of *minoritas* (greatness, self-elevation, pride, wealth, self-will, arrogance) they did not experience the things of heaven and the grace of God did not reside in them.

Since mankind was “spiritually” poor and deprived of eternal values, Christ made Himself “physically” poor (even helpless), in order to bring spiritual riches to man and enable him to gain possession of the kingdom of heaven. It may appear that God the Father turned the world upside down by sending his Son – God almighty – from the glories of Heaven into the misery of the world in such a lowly state. However, the world was already upside down; through Jesus’s Incarnation, presence, and example of serving the lowliest of the world, he turned it right side up. He showed us the proper way to live. Francis and Clare dedicated their lives to imitating Jesus who showed them how to earn the true kingdom of heaven through *minoritas* – lesserness.

Life in San Damiano

Clare sought to live as a cloistered sister following Jesus's command to his disciples: "Take nothing with you for the journey." Thus, she left the wealth and security of her father's household for the instability of life without possessions. However, given the novelty of Clare's way of life, the unprotected position of San Damiano outside the city walls, the fact that women were not highly regarded in the thirteenth century, plus Clare's influence on other women's convents, it is not surprising to discover that she struggled with the Church hierarchy. Large numbers of women were embracing Clare's Franciscan ideal for women, which at the beginning was not recognized by any civil or religious authority and was often in opposition to the plans of the women's families. In an era when the convent played an important role in civic affairs (often unmarried or widowed women ended up there), it was important to both ecclesial leaders and ordinary citizens alike that they functioned smoothly. Thus, Clare's challenge was to find a way to be faithful to her Franciscan charism while remaining obedient to Church authorities who sought to impose a Benedictine rule on her at San Damiano.

The monastic tradition required possession and ownership as it is tied to rents, dowries, businesses, and a strict enclosure. It is founded on stability. For Clare, poverty was the bedrock of their way of life. It allowed them to detach ourselves from all things in order to joyfully follow the Lord. They chose insecurity and instability in the world in order to have stability and security in the Lord. It was Francis himself who gave them their form of life based on poverty in 1212. Poverty was reflected in every aspect of Clare's religious way of life. Having grown up in an aristocratic land-owning family, she was all too familiar with the risks inherent with land possession. To her, land ownership was too closely associated with feudalism. Over time many well-to-do convents had acquired large land holdings. The land was laboriously worked by poor peasants who paid rents to the convents. Clare continued to protest to Friar Illuminato, although he was on her side. They chose a poor life here in San Damiano outside the city walls. They desired to be like the poor and marginalized people who lived near them. The sisters served them, not the other way around."

At San Damiano, they refused to accept dowries with women who entered. Dowries were a common monastic custom in her day, as they provided convents with income. However, the tradition encouraged convents to court women from more prominent families by offering them special treatment and privileges within the convents. This led to a separation between highborn and lowborn women in the communities. The nuns from noble backgrounds were served by lowborn nuns. In San Damiano, they eliminated any such distinction by requiring that every woman give away whatever she owns (if anything at all) before entering. No one enjoyed a privileged status and all were equal; all served one another.

Even though the sisters did not accept money or possessions, nonetheless they worked and were not idle. They maintained enough land for a vegetable garden which the sisters and Clare tended to in order to grow food. They also performed manual chores and assignments which were rotated on a monthly basis. In Clare's time, highborn people did not work with their hands, as manual labor was considered work of the lowborn. But in an effort to create authentic fraternity (and to emulate the poor), Clare insisted that all sisters share work assignments equally. Clare viewed work as a service, not a business. She was a noted seamstress; however unlike the Beguines and Humiliati who had developed successful cloth businesses, Clare attached no fixed prices to her work. Rather, she gave away the fruits of her labor, accepting only gift offerings in return.

The monastic tradition generally prohibited any sister from going outside the cloister walls unless seeking to found another convent. At San Damiano, they observed the enclosure, but to the degree that it aided the spiritual life. For Clare, the cloister was a sacred space which enabled them to nurture an intimate relationship with Jesus. Inside the sacredness of the enclosure they were free to focus on the enclosure of the heart. The walls served to create an environment within which they could cherish, protect, and enhance their sense of intimacy and spirituality. They did not believe that the enclosure should be a barrier to shut out God's greater plans. As such, Clare allowed sisters, with permission, to go outside the convent for a useful and reasonable purpose. Also, when in absolute need, Clare permitted specific extern sisters within the community to go outside the convent to beg alms." As a contemplative and prayerful woman, Clare's attitude toward the enclosure can be discerned in a letter she wrote to Blessed Agnes of Prague: "May you cling to His most sweet mother who gave birth to a Son Whom the

heavens could not contain, and yet she carried Him in the little cloister of her holy womb and held Him on her virginal lap... so you, too, by following in her footprints...can always carry Him spiritually in your chaste and virginal body..." What is unique about Clare's spiritual life is how, as a Franciscan woman, she was able to live an enclosed, contemplative life without neglecting the active. At San Damiano, the sisters lived the *Vita Evangelica* – the full Gospel life.

Clare was forced to accept the title of Abbess, which she never liked (it was a monastic title), as it implies hierarchy, command, power, and class distinction. As leader of the community, Clare never sought to be a superior; rather she wanted to be like a mother among daughters. She sought to model herself after Jesus himself through example by instructing and consoling the sisters, washing their feet, cleansing their dirty mattresses, healing their wounds, and interceding for them. She sought to be objective and pastorally sensitive as she concerned herself with the spiritual welfare of all the sisters. To encourage mutuality in community, they had a weekly chapter meeting when everyone (including Clare) confessed her faults. She also consulted with every sister regarding any issue involving the whole monastery. Inside San Damiano, Clare led the community based on principles of servant leadership. She was a contemplative mother and sister who desired to be in touch with the spirituality of her sisters and to share in their spiritual lives. Clare viewed the women living with her in terms deeper than mere associates – they were a fraternity to her, which implied true sisters. As such, Clare's style of leadership was always circular or horizontal – never hierarchical – and never segregated by class.

Prayer and Clare

Clare was a contemplative. From within the enclosure of San Damiano, she and the sisters devoted much time to prayer. In her letters to Blessed Agnes of Prague, she gives us a glimpse of her prayer life. She exhorted the former Princess to adopt a unique vision of prayer and meditation. She wrote, "O most noble Queen, gaze upon [Him], consider [Him], contemplate [Him], as you desire to imitate [Him]." Gazing for Clare is not simply looking; rather it involves an openness of one to the other. Just as Jesus has his arms outstretched on the cross, so should the gazer be completely open to embracing Christ within. She then wrote to consider (or reflect) on how great is God's love through the sacrifice of the cross. It is not the believer who initiates the relationship with God, but God, the Creator, who loved first. "In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us..." God is love, he is good and generous, God gives of himself, it is his nature. The cross is the greatest act of love, surrender, and humility that God offered the world. How could God do anything other than sacrifice himself since he is love? "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish, but have eternal life." Clare then wrote, contemplate. Contemplation for Clare is to enter into the temple with God (cum 'within' + templum 'temple'). It is a personal, sacred encounter with the Lord. In contemplating the mystery of the cross, one is forced with certain fundamental questions: Who is God? Who am I? What meaning does suffering have? The answers are found in the love of God through Jesus Christ. Contemplation leads, finally, to a desire to know and love this God more, to become like Christ. Clare's exhortation to Agnes ended with the instruction to desire to imitate Christ. But the desire to imitate is not so much something that arises from the will; it is, rather, a natural response resulting from the transformation that has taken place within the heart. When one sees like God it naturally follows that one will desire to imitate God in love. The person becomes more charitable and loving; she sees conflict, pain, and the future differently. Prayer leads to a new vision. Through prayer, one can see the world as God sees it, and not despair when the things of the world pass away. Clare knew that the final reward is not in this world; rather, it is in Heaven above. Through daily prayer and contemplation, Clare's vision was changed. Her attitude was transformed and she became more like Christ.

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