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Franciscan Studies, Volume 66, 2008, pp. 413-459 (Article)

Published by Franciscan Institute Publications

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/frc.0.0008>

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HERMES AND THE “CO-INCIDENCE” OF SAN DAMIANO¹

*Happy are those whose strength is in you
In whose hearts are the roads to Zion*

Psalm 84:6

The six-week-long course was entitled “Sources for the Life of Saint Francis” and encompassed everything contained in the famous *Omnibus of Sources, Thirteenth Century Chronicles, The Sayings of Brother Giles*, and, if possible, the writings by and about Clare. Among the problems confronting this last segment was the lack of available literature. Ignatius Brady’s *The Legend and Writings of St. Clare of Assisi* a work published in 1953 that had been out-of-print for a long while;² whatever biographies were available – primarily that of Nesta DeRobek which had been surprisingly censored – did not provide much critical information.³ Five years later, we saw the publication of *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works* in 1982.⁴ Five years after that, Paulist Press received the results of my initial stumbling encounters with the *Lady Clare*: the manuscript for *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*.⁵

¹ The foundations of the first part of this paper can be found from one presented at the First International Gathering of Capuchin Poor Clares in the Monastery of Saint Veronica Giuliani, Mexico City, May 15-27, 2006. The second part comes from an address delivered at Saint Bonaventure University on July 15, 2007.

² Ignatius Charles Brady, *The Legend and Writings of St. Clare of Assisi*, Introduction, Translation, and Studies (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1953).

³ Nesta DeRobeck, *St. Clare of Assisi* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1951); reprinted (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1980). Clare’s of being at the breast of Francis was not published.

⁴ *Francis & Clare: The Complete Works*, Classics of Western Spirituality Translated by Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady, Preface by John Vaughn (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1982).

⁵ *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, edited and translated by Regis J. Armstrong, Introduction by Veronica Namoyo (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 333 pages. *The Lady. Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, edited and expanded by Regis J. Armstrong, Introduction by Raniero Cantalamessa (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2006), 447 pages.

Only at the completion of the first edition of that early literature about her life did I become conscious that most of it—if not all—had been written by men. Awareness of a fact so very simple prompted work on a second, expanded, and more refined edition that was filled with explanatory linguistic, legal, and liturgical footnotes.⁶ A later third edition incorporated the insights that scholars discovered and the sophisticated apparatus they had developed in the wake of the re-discovery of this woman.⁷

How her writings have been used and interpreted in the articulation of that spirituality over the past twenty years, however, has been confusing especially when placed in the larger context of those writings about her. It was the word “interpretation” that troubled me. Clare had become for me a woman of mystery, hidden within the walls of San Damiano and known to me by literally a handful of her writings. From this vantage point, I began to ask: Are there dimensions of the spiritual tradition imparted by Clare that I overlooked? Asking this raised yet another far more daunting question: did this or could this twenty-first-century, American, itinerant male *interpret* accurately the world of this thirteenth-century, Umbrian, enclosed woman? Responding to those questions demanded some sort of framework. Finding one became problematic because of the recent wave of literature written by a broad range of scholars in the academic world.

During my search, however, a verse from Psalm Eighty-four acted as the refrain of a liturgical Responsorial Psalm as daily I scoured—as may become tediously evident—a wide variety of readings to find answers: *Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose hearts are the roads to Zion*. Not until I had received some answers, did I realize how in the spirit of Clare—and Francis—I had received them: “through divine inspiration.”⁸

⁶ *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, 2nd edition, edited and translated by Regis J. Armstrong, Introduction by Veronica Namoyo (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 1993), 434 pages.

⁷ *The Lady. Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, edited and expanded by Regis J. Armstrong, Introduction by Raniero Cantalamessa (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2006), 447 pages.

⁸ Cf. *infra*.

I

PERSPECTIVES

It was a remarkable gathering: thirty members of the American Academy of Religion had come to San Francisco as part of its annual meeting who agreed to spend time apart discussing informally our methods for the teaching and study of spirituality. In addition to my confreres, J.A. Wayne Hellmann and William J. Short, and myself, were the Americans: Sandra M. Schneiders, whose article "Spirituality in the Academy" raised serious questions about the success of teaching a multi-faceted discipline,⁹ and Bernard McGinn, who had just published the first of his six-volume history of mysticism.¹⁰ There were the English Jesuit, Philip Sheldrake, whose book, *Spirituality and History*, raised, as its subtitle indicates, "questions of interpretation and method,"¹¹ and the Canadian philosopher, Walter Principe, whose study of the attempt to define spirituality was raising fundamental questions about the nature of what was being taught under the umbrella of "spirituality."¹²

The results of that one morning's meeting were two vehicles which have enabled the conversation of that day to continue: the establishment of The Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality and the publication of the *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* which in 2001 was expanded and renamed *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*.¹³ With the help of these two means of communication, the vast amount of literature published under the title heading of

⁹ Sandra M. Schneiders, "Spirituality as an Academic Discipline: Reflections from Experience," *Theological Studies*, 50 (1989):

¹⁰ Bernard McGinn, *Foundations of Mysticism. The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

¹¹ Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

¹² Walter H. Principe, "Toward Defining Spirituality," *Studies in Religion / Sciences religieuses* 12.2 (1983): 135-36.

¹³ *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* published by John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD.

“spirituality,” has been carefully disseminated, analyzed and discussed.

FINDING A VANTAGE POINT

While many welcomed the contemporary interest in spirituality as a positive sign, it has also obscured clarity about its nature and has prompted more than one contributor to ask: “What do we mean by ‘spirituality’?” As Lawrence Cunningham of the University of Notre Dame wryly observes:

... the word “spirituality” is today employed to describe everything from New Age practices and therapies to overcome addictions (such as Twelve Step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous) to forms of oriental meditation, prayer groups, and retreats in the desert.¹⁴

The starting place of any scholarly discussion of Christian spirituality, then, begins with defining it, a task that is more difficult than it seems.

The Latin noun, *spiritualitas*, appeared for the first time in a letter ascribed to St. Jerome in which he wrote: “*Age ut in spiritualitate proficias* [Act in order to grow in spirituality].”¹⁵ Of course this reflects Jerome’s translation of the Hebrew noun, *ruah* [spirit], in the Old Testament and the Greek adjective, *pneumatikos* [spiritual], a word that appears twenty-two times in the New Testament. “It is clear,” Bernard McGinn observes, “that in this text, the term still bears the meaning that *pneumatikos* had from the origins of Christianity—increase your hold on the Spirit of Jesus, the source of the Christian life.”¹⁶ Thus, “... to grow in spirituality ...” signified the process of moving beyond the *sarx* [flesh] and into the spirit.

¹⁴ Lawrence Cunningham and Keith J. Egan, *Christian Spirituality: Themes from the Tradition* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1996), 5-6.

¹⁵ PL 30: 115A.

¹⁶ Bernard McGinn, “The Letter and the Spirit: Spirituality as an Academic Discipline,” in *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 1 (Fall 1993): 3.

By the time of Francis and Clare, however, *spiritualitas* had begun to appear more frequently and, curiously, more diversely. By the mid-thirteenth century at least three, possibly four, distinct meanings emerged: the biblical, the naturalistic, the philosophical, and juridical. According to Lucy Tinsley, *spiritualitas* became the vernacular *espiritualité* in mid-thirteenth century Old French and then entered fourteenth and fifteenth-century Middle English, in all instances in the same context of juridical language.¹⁷ In the sixteenth century, the meaning of the word fluctuated as the influences of Scholastic Thomism grew in strength. Quietism brought an understanding of mysticism into question, and Protestant expressions of piety and devotion spread. The academic manuals of Pierre Pourret, Joseph de Guibert, and Adolphe Tanquerey articulated definitions of Christian spirituality that absorbed many of these influences, especially the more Scholastic influences which reflected heavily a systematic theological approach. In his *Compendio di Teologia Spirituale*, Charles André Bernard, former professor of spirituality at the Gregorian University, notes that Pierre Pourret, for example, defined spirituality as "that part of theology which deals with Christian perfection and the ways that lead to it." Bernard himself builds on this definition and sees spirituality as "a theological discipline studying Christian existence by describing its progressive development and elucidating its structures and laws."¹⁸

In an article that appeared in one of the first issues of the *Christian Spirituality Bulletin*, Bernard McGinn reflects on discovering thirty-eight different definitions of spirituality which, he proposes, approach the subject from three different perspectives. The first of these is theological in nature, the second anthropological, and the last historical-contextual.¹⁹ From these different vantage points we have a prism through which we might look at the Gospel vision of Clare

¹⁷ Lucy Tinsley, *The French Expressions for Spirituality and Devotion: A Semantic Study* (Washington, DC: Catholic University, 1953).

¹⁸ C.A. Bernard, *Compendio di Teologia Spirituale* (Rome: Gregorian University, 1976), 37.

¹⁹ Bernard McGinn, *Letter 4-7*.

and re-visit some of those questions that have challenged through the many years devoted to her writings.

With which side of the prism, however, was I to begin? There was initially a temptation to consider the historically influenced definitions: given the nature of these reflections such an approach seems most logical since it is difficult—if not impossible—to define Franciscan spirituality aside from the person and personality of Francis. Then, there was a time of reflecting on those definitions that “put the greatest stress on spirituality as an element in human nature and experience,” the definition concerned with passing on the heritage to younger generations with their contemporary preoccupations and views. The theologically rooted definitions, however, absorbed much of my attention as I attempted to grapple with Bernard McGinn’s breakdown of “first-order” and “second-order” definitions,²⁰ Sandra Schneider’s understanding of spirituality as “a dogmatic position supplying a ‘definition from above’ and an anthropological position supplying a ‘definition from below’”;²¹ and Walter Principe’s analysis of three levels of spirituality: (a) the real or existential; (b) the formulation of a teaching about a lived reality; (c) the study by scholars of the first and especially of the second of these.²²

THE THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Two factors influenced my decision to begin with the theological. The first of these was the doctoral dissertation of Gregory LaNave, *The Pursuit of Wisdom and Holiness in the Writings of Bonaventure*.²³ The second was an article in *Commonweal* written by my colleague, Joseph Komonchak,

²⁰ McGinn, *Letter*, 4.

²¹ Schneiders, *Spirituality in the Academy*, 682.

²² Walter Principe, *Toward Defining*, 135-36.

²³ Gregory LaNave, *Through Holiness to Wisdom: The Nature of Theology according to St. Bonaventure*, Bibliotheca seraphico-capuccina, 76 (Roma: Istituto Storico dei Cappuccini, 2005).

shortly after the election of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger as Pope Benedict XVI.²⁴

Not unlike other doctoral students, Gregory LaNave's dissertation was almost derailed when a similar topic was published by Charles Carpentier, *Theology and Holiness in the Thought of Bonaventure*,²⁵ a work I had devoured when it appeared six years earlier. The vast differences between the two were not immediately apparent until I recognized that Carpentier interprets the writings of Bonaventure through the Thomistic lens of Bernard Lonergan, while LaNave interprets Bonaventure through Bonaventure.²⁶ After reading LaNave's dissertation, I happened upon Joseph Komonchak's approach to the theology of the controversial theologian, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. In "The Church in Crisis. The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI," Komonchak suggests:

There are remarkable parallels between Bonaventure's final view [in the *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*], as described by Ratzinger, and the basic attitude the new pope has himself adopted in the face of the great changes in the post-Vatican II church.²⁷

Both men, LaNave and Komonchak, set in motion for me two long summers of reading the writings of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, but with an attentive eye to the influence of the Franciscan Bonaventure upon him.

Whatever the reasons may be, there is now a greater tendency to speak in the more Pauline terms of Christian spirituality as the work of the Spirit who proclaims Jesus as Lord and who together with our spirit cries out "Abba, Father." Working from this understanding Walter Principe defined

²⁴ Joseph A. Komonchak, "The Church in Crisis: Pope Benedict's Theological Vision," *Commonweal* 132 (June 3, 2005): 11-14.

²⁵ Charles Carpentier, *Theology as the Road to Holiness in St. Bonaventure*, Theological Inquiries (New York: Paulist Press, 1999).

²⁶ A similar approach was taken by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger a few years ago when he considered the virtue of hope in both Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure. Cf. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Yes Of Jesus Christ: Exercises In Faith Hope And Love* (New York: Crossroad, 2005).

²⁷ Komonchak, *Crisis*, 12.

spirituality in general in terms that important anthropological and historical elements, but defined specifically Christian spirituality as “life in the Spirit as brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ and daughters and sons of the Father,” a definition that he see as very much in accord with the thought of Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar.²⁸ By chance, however, I came upon a comment of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger published in a series of article celebrating his seventy-fifth birthday:

The words “pneumatology” and “spirituality” ... are, simply from the linguistic point of view, very closely related: one word is a translation of the other. A connection of fundamental importance thereby finds expression: the Holy Spirit may be recognized in the way in which he shapes human life; and, vice versa, life shaped by faith points us toward the Holy Spirit. Reflecting on “Christian spirituality” means talking about the Holy Spirit, who is making himself known when human life receives a new center; talking about the Holy Spirit includes looking at people to whom he has given himself.²⁹

This theological insight of now Pope Benedict XVI rightfully resonates with theologians of the Augustinian and Franciscan schools. In many ways, it echoes with what both Francis and Clare maintain would have us desire above all things: “the Spirit of the Lord and His holy activity.”

We should be grateful for the pioneering work of those who performed a great service by raising our consciousness of the pneumatological dimensions of our Franciscan heritage, above all, Optatus van Asseldonk.³⁰ At the same time, we

²⁸ Principe, *Toward Defining*, 135.

²⁹ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “The Holy Spirit as Communion,” in *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion*, Edited by Stephan Otto Horn and Vinzenz Pfnür, Translated by Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 38.

³⁰ Optatus Van Asseldonk, “The Holy Spirit in the Writings and Life of St. Clare,” *Greyfriars Review* 1(1987): 94-104; “The Spirit of the Lord and His Holy Activity in the Writings of Francis,” *Greyfriars Review* 5(1991):

should not overlook the input of authors like Norbert Nguyen-Van-Khanh, whose *The Teacher of His Heart: Jesus Christ in the Thought and Writings of St. Francis* placed Franciscan spirituality in a Trinitarian framework.³¹ Not only have these contributions helped us to overcome a more scholastic approach to spirituality; they have opened for us the decidedly Trinitarian character of the Gospel vision of Francis and Clare, that is to say, of the Spirit's activity in deepening our conformity with Christ, and, while on the way to the Father, uniting us in communion with God and with one another.

This mutually shared Trinitarian spirituality of Francis and Clare is perhaps most simply and clearly articulated in Clare's *Form of Life*. After moving from the concerns for silence and association with outsiders described in chapter five, Clare proceeds in the sixth chapter to an articulation of what she sees as the very heart of the daily life of her sisters: the Gospel intuition of Francis expressed in the *Form of Life* he gave to her as early as 1212 or 1213:

Because by divine inspiration you have made yourselves daughters and handmaids of the most High, most Exalted King, the heavenly Father, and been espoused by the Holy Spirit as your spouse by choosing to live according to the perfection of the holy Gospel ...³²

All of the elements of a Trinitarian spirituality are present: to make oneself a daughter and handmaid "of the most high, most exalted King, the heavenly Father"; to take "the Holy Spirit as a spouse" and the choice "to live according to the perfection of the holy Gospel."

105-58; 'Maria Santissima e lo Spirito Santo in Francesco d'Assisi' *La Lettera e Lo Spirito* II (Roma: Editrice Laurentianum, 1985), 93-123.

³¹ Norbert Nguyen-Van-Khanh, *The Teacher of His Heart: Jesus Christ in the thought and Writings of St. Francis*, trans. Edward Hagman (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1994).

³² Clare of Assisi, *Form of Life* VI 3 in *The Lady*. Clare of Assisi: Early Documents, edited and expanded by Regis J. Armstrong. Introduction by Raniero Cantalamessa (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2006), 118. All subsequent translations of the writings of Clare will be taken from this edition.

What does this passage envision for the day-to-day life of Clare and her Sisters? Why did Francis express it so briefly? Could it have been that he realized that this Trinitarian view of life would touch on so many dimensions of the daily life: the pursuit of holiness, the life of prayer, an understanding of asceticism, and the ultimate fulfillment of the mandate he heard from the cross of San Damiano. Could it have been that he knew that *as women* they would discover what was meant and bring the holy Gospel to birth at its proper time and in their own way?

Reflecting on the opening and closing antiphons in the *Office of the Passion* may offer us some insights particularly when we recognize that when Francis used this prayer he would have recited this antiphon fourteen times daily:

Holy Virgin Mary,
among the women born into the world,
there is no one like you.
Daughter and servant
of the most high supreme King
and of the Father in heaven,
Mother of our most holy Lord Jesus Christ,
Spouse of the Holy Spirit...³³

Other than the opening phrase, each phrase echoes the *Form of Life* Francis gave to Clare. Of both loving women, Mary and Clare, he could use the phrase “daughter and handmaid.” In both beloved women, Mary and Clare, he could see a “spouse of the Holy Spirit.” And through both women, Mary and Clare, he could see the Word brought into his world: literally through the one who, as Clare describes her, “... carried Him in the little cloister of her holy womb;” symbolically through the other who, day-by-day in the hidden life of San Damiano, conceived and brought Him to birth through the perfection of the Gospel. In a sense each phrase describes Clare as well as it does Mary. It is as if Francis, when confronted with the prospect of having Clare journey with him in this Gospel way

³³ Francis of Assisi, *Office of the Passion*, Antiphon, in *The Saint*, 141.

of life, found in the virgin Mother of God the pattern for her life.

How unmistakably Clare lived out this Marian spirituality may be seen by the testimonies of those sisters who lived with her. Sister Cristiana, the fifth witness during the process of canonization claimed: "... all that could be said about the holiness of another woman besides the Virgin Mary, she would say truly about her."³⁴ Sister Balvina, the sixth witness, was more expressive:

The witness also said, because of her simplicity, she would not know in any way how to speak about the good and the virtues in her, that is, her humility, kindness, patience, and the other virtues she had in such abundance that she firmly believed, except for the Virgin Mary, no other woman was greater than the Lady.³⁵

This undoubtedly prompted Pope Alexander IX to extol her in the hymn he composed for the liturgy in her honor as the *Mater Christi vestigium* [the footprint of the Mother of Christ].³⁶ That title was incorporated, of course, by the anonymous author of the Legend when he wrote:

Therefore,
let the men follow the new male disciples
of the Incarnate Word
[and] the women imitate Clare,
the footprint of the Mother of God,
a new leader of women.³⁷

Historical theology clearly demonstrates the influence of Mary, the Mother of God, in developing orthodox articulations of the Incarnate Word of God, the role of the Holy Spirit,

³⁴ *Acts of the Process of Canonization* V 8, 167.

³⁵ *Acts* VII 11, 172.

³⁶ Cf. Alexander IX, *De sancta Clara: Ad Vesperas* 1, *Liturgische Reimofficient des Mittelalters*. *Analecta Hymnica Medii Aevi* XXV. Ed. Clemens Blume (Leipzig: O.R. Reisland, 1897), 149.

³⁷ Anonymous, *The Legend of Clare*, Preface, 279.

and, more recently, in an ever-deepening understanding of the mystery of the Church. Might not the same be said about developing an understanding of pneumatology and, consequently, of spirituality! That being the case, a theologically sound Mariology enables us to acquire ever more profound insights into the Gospel life of Clare, and, from this perspective, both women may well enable us to understand more fully that of Francis.

How Francis envisioned Clare and her sisters cultivating the Marian contours of the Trinitarian spirituality can best be found in the phrase: “divine inspiration.” His *Form of Life* for Clare and her sisters may well be the first instance of Francis’s use of the term.³⁸ Recent editions of the writings of Francis and Clare suggest the influence of Paul’s second letter to Timothy in this phrase:

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults, and giving instruction for right living.³⁹

This possible connection between Francis and Paul rings true when we discover that medieval authors frequently wrote of divine inspiration in the context of the role of scripture in the spiritual life.⁴⁰ It may also help to explain why, in his *Tes-*

³⁸ It does appear twice in his *Earlier Rule* (II 1 and XVI 3) to refer to what we might describe as a “process of discernment” – in the first instance to entrance into the brotherhood and in the second to a call to ministry in the foreign missions. It is reasonable to see both of these references as coming at a later date.

³⁹ 2 Tim 3:16. The allusion may also come from 2 Peter 1:21: “For prophecy came not by the will of man at any time: but the holy men of God spoke, inspired by the Holy Spirit.” Both biblical texts are used in defining the divine inspiration of Scripture.

⁴⁰ Gregory the Great (+ 604), Bede the Venerable(+735), and Peter Abelard (+1142) are among a few who have written of “divine inspiration” in the context of scripture and the pursuit of virtue. Closer to Clare’s time, Hildegard of Bingen has two references to “divine inspiration in her *Liber Vitae Meritorum*. While writing of the growing virtue in light of the word of God, Hildegard writes: “All the beauty and embellishment of divine inspiration, as it were, the flowering and embellishment of the virtue of God, as well as divine inspiration itself, are glorified through the soul. For then the soul in which God is, performs good works, God’s glory is magnified with heavenly praises since the sould comes from God.” Cf. Hildegard of Bingen,

tament, Francis expresses his esteem and respect for theologians "who minister to us spirit and life," i.e. the word.⁴¹ It may also enable us to identify this "breathing-in" as the energy or dynamism forming the basic contours of their day-to-day Trinitarian life and, equally as important, the freedom given by the Spirit of Sacred Scripture to work out its details.⁴²

We might find a similar approach taken by Francis in the twenty-second chapter of the *Earlier Rule* and in his advice to his brothers at the time of his death. Whatever the context of that twenty-second chapter may have been, the teachings of Jesus permeate it. "Now that we have left the world," Francis begins, "we have nothing else to do but to follow the will of the Lord and to please him." A startling simplification of his vision of Gospel life that implies a freedom that is akin to that of Augustine's *Dilige, et quod vis fac* [Love, and do what you will!]⁴³ On his death-bed he says something similar: "I have done what is mine; may Christ teach you what is yours!"⁴⁴ In all these instances Francis proposes a spirituality that is solidly developed through a sound biblical theology and, we might conclude, a process of discernment for daily life in which fidelity to the demands of the Gospel is indicative of the Spirit's presence.⁴⁵ In his *Method in Theol-*

Liber Vitae Meritorum, Part I 46, Part IV 22, trans. Bruce W. Hozeski (New York & London: Garland Publisher, Inc., 1994), 30-1, 186.

⁴¹ Cf. Francis of Assisi, *Testament* 13, "And we must honor all theologians and those who minister the most holy divine words and respect them as those who minister to us *spirit and life* (cf. John 6:63)."

⁴² An observation of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger might be helpful here. While commenting on the need to acquire a deeper knowledge of Scripture he notes: "There is a saying of Gregory the Great ... The Word of God grows with the reader (cf. *Hom. In Ez. 1, 7, 8*; PL 76, 843D). And the reader grows as well, and then the Word really shows its greatness, and at the same time grows out into history." *God and the World*, 154.

⁴³ Augustine, *In Epistolam Joannes ad Parthos* 7:8 (PL 35:2033). Cf. Augustine, Saint, "Homily VII on the Epistle of St. John," 8, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. A Select Library of the Christian Church. First Series. Volume 7*, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publisher, Inc. 1994), 503.

⁴⁴ Thomas of Celano, *Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* 214, in *The Founder*, FA:ED 3, 386.

⁴⁵ In this context, the phrase "divine inspiration" takes on yet another challenge. Francis also uses the phrase when confronted with discerning

ogy, Bernard Lonergan makes another contribution to this dimension of the “biblical-liturgical” spirituality of Francis and Clare. “As intelligent,” he suggests, “the subject seeks insight and as insights accumulate, he reveals them in his behavior, his speech, his grasp of situations, his mastery of theoretic domains.”⁴⁶

There will be a need to return to this “theological side” side of the prism to place the day-to-day Trinitarian implications of the *Form of Life* given by Francis to Clare. For the moment, it suffices to acknowledge how enriching these may be and to recognize how the literature of contemporary spirituality has benefited from exploring them.⁴⁷ Now it is necessary to turn to the other quotation of Francis that Clare provides in the sixth chapter of her *Form of Life*:

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 [Matt 10:22] 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. And keep careful watch that you never depart from this by reason of the teaching or advice of anyone.

If this was written, as Clare tells us, “shortly before” Francis’s death, its encouragement to a Trinitarian life pursued in poverty was grasped after fifteen years of experiencing what

the authenticity of those sensing a call to go among the Saracens, that is, to be exposed to the possibility of martyrdom. Isn’t this the “perfection of the holy Gospel” of which Francis writes? If so, Clare’s wish to endure martyrdom and her willingness to accept a life of sickness become even more comprehensible.

⁴⁶ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Seabury Press, 1979), 10.

⁴⁷ I am indebted to Michael Downey and Catherine Mowry LaCugna whose writings articulate the dimensional challenges of a Trinitarian spirituality. Cf. Michael Downey, “Trinitarian Spirituality,” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993): 968-82; *Altogether Gift: A Trinitarian Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000); Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1991); “The Practical Trinity,” *Christian Century* 109.22 (July 15, 1992): 678-82.

a challenge that demanded. This takes us from the theological approach to the anthropological or hermeneutical.

THE "HERMENEUTICAL" PERSPECTIVE

In describing the second major category of definitions of spirituality he unearthed, McGinn employs the term, "anthropological," a word he judges to embrace the psychological, sociological, and cultural realities that affect the spiritual life. Studies in the spirituality of Clare abound, as we know, in areas that McGinn places under the umbrella of anthropology: studies placing Clare in the vortex of women in the thirteenth century,⁴⁸ examining her education and, in particular, her writing skills,⁴⁹ probing her psychological background, and so on.

While not rejecting McGinn's insights, however, Sandra Schneiders nuances them by using the term "hermeneutical," a word with which this biblical scholar is most familiar.⁵⁰ As in biblical studies, so too in the study of spirituality: the art of hermeneutics is complex and multifaceted in that it requires, especially in the study of the classics of the literature flowing from spiritual experience, knowledge of the contemporary psyche of the one interpreting them. In addition to studying the classics, Schneiders underscores the study of life and, in particular, of the spiritual life which she believes,

⁴⁸ Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages: The Historical Links between Heresy, the Mendicant Orders, and the Women's Religious Movement in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century, with the Historical Foundations of German Mysticism*, translated by Steven Rowan with introduction by Robert E. Lerner (Notre Dame, London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995); Maria Pia Alberzoni, *Clare of Assisi and the Poor Sisters in the Thirteenth Century*, ed. Jean-François Godet-Calogeras (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2004).

⁴⁹ Timothy Johnson, "Clare, Leo, and the Authorship of the Fourth Letter to Agnes of Prague," *Franciscan Studies* 62 (2004): 90-100.

⁵⁰ Sandra Schneiders, "A Hermeneutical Approach to the Study of Christian Spirituality," *Minding the Spirit*, ed. Elizabeth Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore & London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2005), 49-64.

because it is concerned with experience, "... is notoriously difficult to define and [problematic because it] is exacerbated by the addition of the adjective 'spiritual.'" ⁵¹ To simplify her approach, Schneiders suggests finding and interpreting "an ancient reality or text in contemporary language."

To exemplify nuances that might seem highly erudite and pedantic, Schneiders turns to Teresa of Ávila's description of her conversion as a lens through which to examine her experience of God. Focusing on Teresa's autobiography—the "ancient text"—and, in particular, her experience of the crucified Christ on the cross of her convent's oratory—the "ancient reality," ⁵² Schneiders proceeds to probe its depths by asking questions that touch on interpretations of history and, more provocatively, on the psychological, sociological/feminist, and cultural dimensions of a sixteenth century Spanish woman. ⁵³

Were we to follow this approach, the "ancient reality" might be, as it was in case of Teresa of Ávila, the crucified Christ, in this instance, however, the crucified Christ on the cross of San Damiano. The "ancient text" might be Clare's most personal writings, her four letters to Agnes. ⁵⁴ Whereas

⁵¹ Schneiders, *Hermeneutical*, 52.

⁵² Cf. Teresa of Ávila, *The Life of Teresa of Ávila of Jesus*, trans. and ed. E. Allison Peers (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1960).

⁵³ John Paul II recognized the implications of this role of experience in his homily at the proclamation of Thérèse of Lisieux as the youngest of all doctors of the Church. In the words of *Dei Verbum* he reminded us: "... that 'profound understanding of spiritual things' is given through experience, with the wealth and diversity of gifts, to all those who let themselves be docilely led by God's Spirit;" and, in the words of *Lumen Gentium*, that God Himself "speaks to us" in His saints and for, this reason, the spiritual experience of the saints has a special value for deepening our knowledge of divine mysteries.

⁵⁴ Why only her letters? Carl Becker offers a reason: "The record of events, of what men have done, is relatively rich and informing. But a record of the state of mind that conditioned those events, a record that might enable us to analyze the complex instincts and emotions that lie behind the avowed purpose and the formulated principles of action – such a record is largely wanting. What one requires for such investigation are the more personal writings—memoirs, and, above all, letters—in which individuals consciously or unconsciously reveal the hidden springs of conduct." Carl Becker as quoted in *A Treasury of the World's Great Letters*, ed. M. Lincoln Shuster (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940), xl. Cf. Regis J. Armstrong,

his visit to San Damiano brought Francis into a decisive, face-to-face encounter with the crucified Christ, her forty-one years of living within its walls brought Clare daily into an ever-more profound embrace of her Spouse, the poor crucified Christ. Toward the end of her life, she writes of it as "that mirror, suspended on the wood of the cross" and delicately blends her images of the cross and of the crucified as she encourages Agnes to make it the focal point of her entire daily life.

It is this single-minded focus on the poor Christ that inspired Clare to put on the garment of his poverty. Curiously, an articulation of Clare's passion for poverty emerges only in 1234 when she first writes to a woman who desires to emulate her, Agnes of Prague. From the very first she is eloquent and inspiring; to this day, this "ancient text" continues to be so. It prompts us to wonder, however: what were her experiences of being poor during those first twenty-two years (1212-1234) in the small world of San Damiano, that is, the years that preceded her letters to Prague? How did they impact upon her and lead her to defend being poor so passionately? What did they teach her, in other words, about "the divine mysteries" of the poor Christ prompting her to be that "passionate lover of the poor, crucified Christ, with whom she wanted to identify absolutely."⁵⁵ Four experiences of being poor during those first twenty-four years seem to be worthy of our consideration.

In the first place, being poor meant for Clare the physical poverty of the actual monastery, San Damiano, which during those first years must have been extremely pristine, stark, and austere. What must it have been like during those first years? It is difficult for us to imagine as we now tend to look at it through the colored lens of a romantic imagination. A visit to it in the winter or on a damp, cold day in early spring is sufficient to give a modern day visitor a taste of the hardship and destitution these women endured. Its geographical

"Starting Points: Images of Women in the Letters of Clare," *Collectanea Franciscana* 62 (1992): 63-100.

⁵⁵ John Paul II, Letter to the Poor Clares, *L'Osservatore Romano*, English Edition, August 25, 1993.

location, moreover, should not be overlooked as, even today, the visitor has to go out of the way to visit it. Nonetheless, when motivated, the human spirit is resilient in enduring hardship, suffering, and want. One becomes accustomed to such physical poverty; it might not be welcomed but it can be endured. From this point of view, being poor taught Clare what a liberating power it is by enabling the one who accepts it to transcend what would materially seem necessary.

Clare's second experience of poverty became quite prolonged and undoubtedly more psychologically painful and trying: her loss of health. In the *Acts of the Process of Canonization*, Pacifica claims that Clare was sick for twenty-nine years, which would mean that she began to be ill in 1224.⁵⁶ She attributes her sickness to her abstinence and fasts which were so prolonged and strict that both Francis and the Bishop of Assisi had to intervene.⁵⁷ Francis's companions mention that Clare was seriously ill and feared she might have died before Francis.⁵⁸ It is not difficult to surmise that the living conditions at San Damiano did not help her condition. In any case, her sickness must have been debilitating physically and confining her to bed for seemingly long periods of time. Sickness became a constant companion of Clare from this point, an intimate friend who never left her until death. It can only be imagined how emotionally draining this must have been. The loss of one's health is one of the most enervating experiences of life for it brings into focus the gift of God that health is and into sharper clarity the reality of death.

A third and probably frequent experience of the poverty Clare experienced during those first twenty-two years in San Damiano must have been the loss of her companions either through death or through necessity. Ortolana, Clare's mother, may have died during those years. Little is known of them, yet it takes no stretch of the imagination to realize the some of her first companions must also have died before 1234. Others certainly left to establish or help in new foundations. One of those was her own sibling, Agnes, who left in 1230 to found

⁵⁶ *Acts of the Process of Canonization* I: 17 in *The Lady*, 149.

⁵⁷ *Acts* I: 1-8, in *The Saint*, FA:ED 1, 146.

⁵⁸ *The Assisi Compilation* 13 in *The Founder*, FA:ED 2, 128.

the monastery in Monticelli. The letter that Agnes wrote to her sister is possibly one of the most emotional in all early Franciscan literature as she pours out the depths of her own feelings of separation, feelings that possibly reflect Clare's own.⁵⁹ The loss of any sister in a small community must be an experience of poverty, particularly when it may be a permanent one: part of the community dies.

Lastly, Clare must have experienced an overwhelming sense of poverty at the death of Francis, her "pillar, only consolation after God, and support."⁶⁰ Nonetheless, it is clear from her *Testament* that the remembrance of his death prompted a remembrance of the commitment to poverty that she, together with him, had embraced out of love of God. In that same passage of the *Testament*, there is a hint of the fear, disillusion, and disappointment she intuited that, without him, others would doubt the Gospel dream they both shared.⁶¹

What did these four experiences of being poor teach Clare? All too easily the words come in reply: the poverty of Christ in the self-emptying of Bethlehem, in the silent resignation of the hidden life of Nazareth, and in the total abandonment of Calvary. Would it not be more appropriate, however, to suggest that while her poor Christ taught Clare *how* to be poor, *what* He taught her about being poor was something else? As the young, idealistic woman embraced his poverty in those early years, Jesus became for Clare the unfathomable confirmation of the lessons of the psalmists that she—like Mary, the Mother of God before her—was imbibing day-by-day. Her experiences of physical and material deprivation, of life-threatening, lingering sickness, and of emptiness must have taught her to resonate with the sentiments she found in the psalms and fleshed-out in Jesus. What they, what Christ taught Clare was to open herself to complete trust in God, to come before God with increasing confidence, and to rely evermore steadfastly on his loving providence.⁶²

⁵⁹ Agnes of Assisi, *Letter*, in *The Lady*, 404-05.

⁶⁰ Clare, *Testament* 38, in *The Lady*, 62.

⁶¹ Clare, *Testament* 34-36, in *The Lady*, 62.

⁶² See Albert Gelin, *The Poor of Yahweh*, trans. Mother Kathryn Sullivan (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1964).

In this light, would it not be more accurate to say that what we so glibly speak of as “the charism” is not poverty as much as it is a profound confidence and trust in a loving God that becomes more unmistakable the more it is challenged? “It is confidence,” Thérèse of Lisieux wrote to her sister, Céline, “and confidence alone that leads to love.”⁶³ As Clare strove daily to strengthen her embrace of the Poor Christ this is what his poverty taught her: confidence in the love of God and in that unbounded confidence to surrender her self in and to that love. Christ’s poverty became the lens through which she viewed life and enabled her to “run and not tire,” for *the Lord’s left hand was under [her] head and His right hand would embrace [her] joyfully* (cf. Sg 2:6).⁶⁴

THE HISTORICAL-CONTEXTUAL PERSPECTIVE

Knowledge of three of the four of Clare’s letters to Agnes of Prague really is a twentieth century phenomenon and an in-depth appreciation of these documents is even more recent and continues to build.⁶⁵ Thanks in part to the

⁶³ Thérèse of Lisieux, “Letter to Sister Marie of the Sacred Heart, September 17, 1896,” in *General Correspondence Volume I (1877-1890)*, trans. John Clarke (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies 1982), 1000.

⁶⁴ The reflections of Bernard of Clairvaux on Sg 2:6 are helpful in this context: “Happy the soul who reclines on the breast of Christ and rests between the arms of the Word! ‘His left arm under my head, his right arm will embrace me.’ She does not say ‘embraces,’ but ‘will embrace me’, to show that far from being ungrateful for the first grace, she anticipates the second by giving thanks.” Cf. Sermon 51:5 in *On the Song of Songs III.*, translated by Kilian Walsh and Irene M. Edmonds, Introduction by Emero Stiegman (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1979), 44.

⁶⁵ The oldest manuscript witness to these letters is dated between 1280 and 1330. It was continually overlooked until 1896 when Achille Ratti, the Prefect of the Ambrosian Library in Milan and later Pope Pius XI, discovered it. Twenty-eight years later, Walter Seton published a critical edition of the letters in the *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 17 (1924): 509-19.

dialogue between Werner Maleczek,⁶⁶ Maria Pia Alberzoni,⁶⁷ and Niklaus Kuster,⁶⁸ Clare's *Testament* has been mined as never before.⁶⁹ Clare's *Form of Life* or *Rule* has always fascinated scholars, but their interest has intensified particularly over the past twenty years as the sadly overlooked history of medieval religious women has grown.⁷⁰ A phenomenon of our contemporary interest in Clare's *Form of Life*, however, is that it is now studied within the context of the five documents that influenced her: the simple *Form of Life* Francis initially provided for her and her first sisters in 1212;⁷¹ that which Hugolino provided for the monasteries of Tuscany and Lombardy seven years later;⁷² the *Privilege of Poverty* granted by Pope Gregory IX in 1228;⁷³ the *Form of Life* of Pope Innocent

⁶⁶ Werner Maleczek, "Das 'Privilegium Paupertatis' Innocenz III. und das Testament der Klara von Assisi. Überlegungen zur Frage ihrer Echtheit," *Collectanea Franciscana* 65 (1995): 5-82; English translation: "Questions about the Authenticity of the Privilege of Poverty of Innocent III and of the Testament of Clare of Assisi," *Greyfriars Review Supplement* 12 (1998): 1-80.

⁶⁷ Maria Pia Alberzoni, "'Nequaquam a Christi sequela in perpetuum absolve desidero.' Chiara tra charisma e istituzione," *Chiara d'Assisi e la Memoria de Francesco*, Atti del convegno per l'VIII Centenario della Nascita di S. Chiara (Città di Castello: Petrucci Editore, 1995): 41-65. English translation: "'Nequaquam a Christi sequela in perpetuum absolve desidero.' Clare between Charism and Institution," *Greyfriars Review Supplement* 12 (1998): 81-121.

⁶⁸ Niklaus Kuster, "Das Armutsprivileg Innozenz III. und Klaras Testament: echt oder raffinierte Fälschungen?" *Collectanea Franciscana* 66 (1996): 5-95. English translation: "Clare's Testament and Innocent III's Privilege of Poverty: Genuine or Clever Forgeries?" *Greyfriars Review* 15 (2001): 171-252.

⁶⁹ Alessandra Bartolomei Romagnoli summarized much of the scholarly work undertaken during recent years, work that had been discussed during the 2003 Convegno in Assisi which was entitled "*Clara claris praeclara. L'esperiezza cristiana e la memoria di Chiara d'Assisi*." In her view, four themes emerged in that gathering: the institutional evolution from San Damiano to the Order of St. Clare; the sources for devotion to and the spirituality of Clare; the "problems" of the "*corpus clariana*"; and the "gathering together" of reminiscences about Clare. Cf. Alessandra Bartolomei Romagnoli, "*Clara claris praeclara: A Proposito dei Nuovi Studi su Chiara d'Assisi*," *Collectanea Franciscana* 75 (2005): 593-617.

⁷⁰ Margaret Carney, *The First Franciscan Woman: Clare of Assisi & Her Form of Life* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1993).

⁷¹ Cf. Supra 8-10.

⁷² Cf. Supra.

⁷³ Pope Gregory IX, *Privilege* in *The Lady*, 86-88.

IV promulgated for the Order of Saint Damian twenty-eight years after that of Hugolino, that is, in 1247;⁷⁴ and, finally, her own which was approved two days before her death, August 9, 1253.⁷⁵

The Canadian philosopher, Walter Principe, maintains that context is a necessary corrective lens in reading the sources for our study or practice of spirituality.⁷⁶ From this perspective, the past twenty years have shown us that examining each of these “legislative” documents in its proper context tells us much about the spirituality of Clare. The study of Englebert Grau in 1980⁷⁷ and the publication of a critical edition of the *Sources Chrésiennes* in 1985⁷⁸ prompted many scholars to focus their attention on Clare in a way unprecedented in history. During their research, these scholars came to recognize the importance of the decrees issued by three of the popes of Clare’s religious life: Honorius III (1219-1227), Gregory IX (1227-1241), Innocent IV (1243-1253).⁷⁹ In doing so they provided neglected resources for the study of religious women in the first half of the thirteenth century. One of the finest examples of these scholarly attempts is that produced in 2003 *Chiara di Assisi e le sue fonti legislative*.⁸⁰ In six easily identifiable columns, the twelve chapters of the *Form of Life of the Poor Ladies* were carefully analyzed in light of the *Rule* of Saint Benedict, the *Form of Life* of Hugolino, the

⁷⁴ Innocent IV, *Form of Life*, in *The Lady*, 89-105.

⁷⁵ Clare of Assisi, *Form of Life*, in *The Lady*, 106-26.

⁷⁶ Walter H. Principe, “Broadening the Focus: Context as a Corrective Lens in Reading Historical Works in Spirituality,” in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Elizabeth A. Dreyer, Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore & London: The John Hopkins University Press: 2005), 42-48.

⁷⁷ Englebert Grau, “Die Schriften der Heiligen Klara und die Werke Ihrer Biographen,” *Movimento Religioso Femine e Francescanesimo nel Secolo XIII* (Assisi: Società Internazionale di Studi Francescani, 1980), 203-13.

⁷⁸ Claire d’Assise, *Écrits*, *Sources Chrésiennes*, edited and translated by Marie-France Becker, Jean-François Godet, Thaddée Matura (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1985).

⁷⁹ A sampling of these papal documents, as well as a bibliographical listing of them, may be found in *The Lady*, 333-87.

⁸⁰ *Chiara di Assisi e le sue fonti legislative*, ed. Le Clarisse della Federazione d’Assisi: Umbria and Sardinia (Padova: Edizioni Messaggero, 2003).

Earlier Rule and the *Later Rule* of Francis, and the *Form of Life* of Innocent IV.

Some of the scholars of the past twenty years, if not most, are women; not a few are lay women and, among these, many are non-Catholic critical historians with varied interests. Inevitably they seem to arrive at the same appreciation of Clare's unique place among religious women who, in the thirteenth century, were drawn to the new expressions of spirituality and religious life introduced by those favoring the *vita apostolica* and a life of itinerant preaching, e.g., the Order of Preachers, the Augustinians, and the Lesser Brothers.⁸¹

Understandably some of these women scholars have studied Clare's *Form of Life* in-depth hoping, by taking this historical-contextual approach, to identify the Church's impositions on women of that time. Others become intrigued by the discovery that Clare's *Form of Life* is the first written by a woman and that this frail woman was so strong in her struggle to fend off any compromises to the Gospel life of poverty inspired in her by Francis. In reviewing the literature concerning the *Form of Life* written by Clare, it becomes clear that contemporary scholars have probed the legislative milieu in which it was crafted, and have enabled us to identify clearly those essential elements of religious life unique to the Poor Ladies.

From a historical-critical examination of her *Form of Life*, what have we learned from these scholarly efforts? In the first place, Clare emerges as a most astute, judicious, and determined woman. From a careful, meticulous analysis of her *Form of Life*, her awareness of the legislation affecting religious women in the first half of the thirteenth century becomes immediately apparent. The Cistercian and the Premonstratensian women of the twelfth century had refined their expressions of the Benedictine Rule to accommodate themselves to different living conditions, as had the Domini-

⁸¹ Cf. Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages: The Historical Links between Heresy, the Mendicant Orders, and the Women's Religious Movement in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century, with the Historical Foundations of German Mysticism*, translated by Steven Rowan with introduction by Robert E. Lerner (Notre Dame, London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

can Sisters of San Sisto and those of other Italian and French foundations in the early thirteenth.⁸² Undoubtedly with help from the future Alexander IV, Cardinal Rainaldo, Clare, as a most discerning, strong woman, was capable of articulating her desires. In some ways, she surprisingly exceeds the severity of other religious groups of women even in some of her prescriptions regarding the enclosure. In other ways, however, she emerges as far more flexible and humane.

Secondly, Clare's vision of Gospel life is crystal clear. By showing the influence of the *Regula bullata* or *Later Rule* of the Lesser Brothers, the first three chapters of her *Form of Life*—and to some extent the fourth—clearly reflect her unwavering resolve to follow the Gospel vision she received from Francis. The same may be said of chapters six, seven, and eight which particularly reveal her tenacity in preserving a life *sine proprio*, and nine and ten which manifest her vision of a life built on love. Nonetheless, comparisons between his *Later Rule* and her own *Form of Life*, however, reveal how discerning and perceptive she was in adapting Francis's Gospel idealism to the situations of the feminine life. The problem chapters of Clare's *Form of Life* are five, eleven and twelve: those that touch on the enclosure and all it implies.

In the historical context in which she lived, why did Clare accept this form of Gospel life and not struggle to obtain permission for its itinerant form as Francis had obtained for his brothers? Was she simply a realist, submitting passively to a hierarchical Church that favored other structures for women than those that were becoming increasingly more fluid? Only her struggle to preserve the heritage of poverty remains known to us. From this perspective, what is obvious is that Clare embraced the Trinitarian life described by Francis and expressed no difficulty in its being lived in the stable, enclosed environment of San Damiano, but with one major difference: the embrace of poverty! When seen in the context of thirteenth century women, did not such a precarious and possibly hazardous life invite vulnerability and risk-taking

⁸² Jean Leclercq, "Women's Monasticism in the 12th and 13th Centuries," in *Greyfriars Review* 7(1993): 167-92.

and, therefore, warrant far more protection than an itinerant life-style?⁸³ Possibly! Nevertheless, we are confronted with the stark facts of history. Would it have been different had Clare been born at another time, in another period of history when she and her sisters could have lived facts of history as we know them and are, therefore, challenged to reflect upon the reality of the enclosure she articulates in her *Form of Life* for which she vigorously sought—and received—papal approval.

II

HERMES, THE GOD OF MULTI-TASKING

In addition to addressing questions of definition, interpretation and the search for dimensions that have been overlooked, ongoing conversations in the academic world have wondered whether our contemporary study of spirituality may be able to repair the breach between life and knowledge, one that began in the late Middle Ages and became solidified in the modern period. Others, perhaps more autobiographical in nature, grappled with the challenge of confronting contemporary women and men with interiorizing the spiritual theology or wisdom of the printed page. *Interiorize*: not through self-absorbed introspection, but as one author observed, "... in ways that open readers to the world, to one another, and to God in compelling ways."⁸⁴ In this light, a new dimension of spirituality in the academic world was recognized: the concern for the self-implicating nature of studying or teach-

⁸³ In his *Homilia* 26: 7, Augustine asks a provocative question about Thomas's absence from the Upper Room: "Do you really believe that it was by chance that this chosen disciple was absent, then came and heard, heard and doubted, doubted and touched, touched and believed? It was not by chance but in God's providence." PL 76: 1201. The same approach might be taken toward the time of Clare. Had she come even fifty years later, an itinerant lifestyle might have been hers. This leaves this a more probing question: did God have a purpose in this?

⁸⁴ Douglas Burton-Christie, *Minding the Spirit*, 62.

ing it. A haunting question arises: are those who study or teach those “ancient texts or realities” open to the actuality that, if it is to be effective, their enterprise should transform them, change their lives in simple, or perhaps even dramatic, ways?

This has prompted discussions about the evocative power of symbols in which it was suggested that much of knowledge of spirituality is expressed through symbolic forms: literary, visual or auditory.⁸⁵ If the strength of a symbol lies in its ability to move from the material order to that of the spiritual or supra-sensible, then an ideal symbol, it may be argued, would express in ways that transcend words the meanings of spirituality. “Symbols,” argues John McKenna,

are experiential. They are not just informative. They take hold of a person’s mind, will and emotions. A good symbol reaches down through the sense, past reason and into the depths of a person’s unconscious psyche to lay hold of the person totally.⁸⁶

Moreover, by its nature, a symbol does not represent or point to an absent reality; on the contrary, it shows the reality to be present and invites the spectator or, more appropriately, the would-be participant into these ever more self-implicating activities. Nonetheless, McKenna points out that symbols are limited as well as historical and can, therefore, “lose their ‘surplus’ of meaning and their closeness to the symbolizer.” Using the words of Paul Tillich, McKenna concludes: “Like living beings, they grow and they die.”⁸⁷ It is important, then, that we use them creatively as invitational expressions welcoming us into deeper mysteries.

⁸⁵ McGinn alludes to this in “The Letter and the Spirit,” 8. A synthesis of the concept of symbol as a representative form and as religious may be found in James M. Somerville, “Symbol,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. XIII (New York, St. Louis, San Francisco, Toronto. London, Sydney: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1967), 860-61.

⁸⁶ John McKenna, “Symbols and Reality: Some Anthropological Considerations,” *Worship* 65(1991): 24.

⁸⁷ McKenna, Symbols, 22.

THE SYM-BOLUM

From its inception our Franciscan tradition has enriched us with symbols—religious, literary, and architectural: all with historically sound foundations. It could be argued that its symbolic dimension flows from the very thirteenth-century persons of Francis and Clare themselves whose very names suggest the symbolic. Among the religious symbols of the Franciscan world the crucifix of San Damiano and the Tau immediately come to mind. Franciscan literature is filled with an endless variety of symbols as the writings of Thomas of Celano and, even more so, Bonaventure exemplify.⁸⁸ In addition to all these, the places and, most of all, the churches associated with both Francis and Clare become most expressive: the Rivo Torto, Greccio, La Verna, the Portiuncula, and, in particular, that ancient church and dwelling which became so decisive in the lives of Francis and Clare, San Damiano. If symbols are evocative, moreover, San Damiano calls us untiringly and ever more profoundly into its mysterious depths.

In telling the story of Francis, San Damiano is pivotal not only for setting the stage of the conflict between the young man and his father, but, more importantly, for becoming the site of the discovery of the saint's mission throughout life. Nonetheless, isn't it curious how in his *Life of Saint Francis* Thomas of Celano overlooks one of the most significant symbols within San Damiano: its crucifix! Instead, Thomas integrates only the place of this "church on the side of the road" into his underlying theology of ecclesial reform.⁸⁹ He includes the incident—which he seemingly learned from

⁸⁸ Once again, however, Francis inspired this characteristic as his *Canticle of Brother Sun* expresses the symbolic character of Franciscan spirituality in perhaps a most extraordinary way prompting Éloi Leclerc, among others, to write of it as a window gazing into his very soul. While it is easy enough to remember the symbols – sun, moon and stars, wind, fire, water, earth, it requires an effort to unlock the depths of the adjectives describing them, but therein are the keys that unlock their treasures. Cf. Éloi Leclerc, *The Canticle of Creatures: Symbols of Union: An Analysis of St. Francis of Assisi*, trans Matthew J. O'Connell (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1976).

⁸⁹ 2C 19, L3C 13 in *The Founder*, FA:ED 2, 249, 76.

the three companions—seventeen years later in his *Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*. Had it appeared in his first portrait, the ecclesial symbolism of San Damiano would have been strengthened. When Thomas does tell the story, however, he neglects a detail the companions include in their own account:

While laboring with others in that work, [Francis] used to cry to passers-by in a loud voice, filled with joy, saying in French: “Come and help me in the work of the church of San Damiano which, in the future, will be a monastery of ladies through whose fame and life our heavenly Father will be glorified throughout the church.”⁹⁰

This, too, would have strengthened Thomas’s perspective of ecclesial reform in which he sees the women of San Damiano actually being the ones who accomplished the restoring of “the ancient house of God.”⁹¹ Whatever the contexts of these stories, all of them accentuate the significant role San Damiano plays in the saga of the Franciscan mission. The stories are, however, riddled with symbols, ones that invite us to enter into the secrets they contain.

To plummet the symbolic depths of San Damiano we might turn once more to the writings of Joseph Ratzinger, this time an early one, *Introduction to Christianity*, in which the future Pope Benedict XVI reflects on “... the unity of the *symbolum*, as the ancient Church called the baptismal profession of faith.” What precisely is a symbol, he asks and proceeds by examining its roots:

Symbolum comes from *symbolleîn*, meaning in English: to come together, to throw together. The background to the word’s etymology is an ancient usage: two corresponding halves—of a ring, a staff, or

⁹⁰ L3C 24 in *The Founder*, FA:ED 2, 83.

⁹¹ Cf. 1C 18-19 in *The Saint*, FA:ED 1, 196-99. Regis J. Armstrong, “Clare of Assisi, the Poor Ladies and Their Ecclesial Mission in the ‘First Life’ of Thomas of Celano.” *Greyfriars Review* 5 (1991): 389-424.

a tablet—were used as tokens of identity for guests, messengers, or partners to a treaty. Possession of the corresponding piece entitled the holder to receive a thing or simply to hospitality. A *symbolum* is something that points to its complementary other half and thus creates mutual recognition and unity. It is the expression and means of unity.⁹²

Two pieces: one that points to its complementary other half! In the second chapter of his *Major Legend*, Bonaventure suggests that initially the young Francis recognized only one piece, that is, its material dimension of the mandate he heard from the Crucified.⁹³ How he came to discover the other, the spiritual implementation, is only revealed at the end of that chapter when Francis rebuilds the church of the Virgin Mary, the Portiuncula. Were we to follow Bonaventure's interpretation of these events in the early life of Francis, it might be easy to surmise that, while Francis had prophesized that San Damiano would become a monastery for women, he may not have understood what that meant until his time rebuilding the church of *the woman*, Mary.

In a footnote to his reflection on the meaning of symbol, one that could be easily overlooked, Ratzinger teases out some further implications of a symbol's role that seem apropos in our discussion of Francis and Clare:

In Plato the idea of symbol is expanded into an interpretation of human nature. In the *Symposium* (191d), he describes man himself, in connection with the androgyne myth, as a half that calls for its complementary other half: σύμβολον [symbol, half] of a human

⁹² Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, translated by J. R. Foster, with a New Preface translated by Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 96-97.

⁹³ Cf. Bonaventure, *Major Legend* II 1: "... he prepared himself to obey and pulled himself together to carry out the command of repairing the material church, although the principal intention of the words referred to that Church which Christ purchased by his own blood, as the Holy Spirit taught him and as he himself later disclosed to his brothers." *The Founder*, FA:ED 2, 536.

being, because we have been cut, like flat-fish, out of a pair. Each of us is always looking for the σύμβολον that belongs to him [for his other half].”⁹⁴

“Thus,” he concludes, “in the description of the creed or profession of faith as the *symbolum* we have at the same time a profound interpretation of its true nature...As *sym-bolum*, it points to the other person, to the unity of spirit in the one Word.”

Had the two “half’s” of the symbol ever discussed in their initial conversations ways of life “in the unity of spirit in the one Word”? What might have been the thoughts of Francis when, five years after receiving the call from the Crucified, his prophetic intuition about San Damiano was fulfilled, that is, when he led a “restless” Clare, carrying “the other half,” to live there?⁹⁵ What were their reactions when, six or seven years later, Hugolino imposed the monastic *Rule* of Saint Benedict—and the enclosure—upon her and her followers, the “Poor Ladies” as they came to be known? This, too, we will never know.

True, their Gospel ways of life were both brought about by the same creative power, “the Spirit of the Lord and His holy activity,” and, because of that, grounded “in the one Word.” The means of expressing that Gospel enterprise—the “itinerant” of Francis and the “monastic” of Clare—became quite different, although their missions were identical: the rebuilding of the house of God. His became an active enterprise of proclaiming the Gospel in word and deed and of gathering people for the Lord; hers was more an embodiment of the Gospel as she and her sisters incarnated in their daily life its Trinitarian character and its profound call to commu-

⁹⁴ Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 97, n.8.

⁹⁵ The choice of “restless” to describe Clare prior to coming to San Damiano reflects the *Legend* IV:7 where the author writes: “After a few days, she went to the church of Sant’ Angelo in Panzo, where her mind was not completely at peace, so that, at the advice of Saint Francis, she moved to San Damiano.” The *Versified Legend* IX 1-2 states that in doing so, Clare was “following Francis’s command.” The *Bull of Canonization* 9/36, possibly influenced by the *Versified Legend* simply says that “she was led by... blessed Francis to the church of Saint Damian.”

nion. To this day may not both be seen as two pieces brought together by the Spirit "in the one Word"? If Clare did not fret about the details and restrictions of the enclosure in chapters five, eleven and twelve of her *Form of Life*, might it have been because she recognized that these were "evocative" externals protecting the inner life of the Gospel perfection, a profoundly Trinitarian life, that she and her sisters were striving to live? At the same time, might she not have appreciated that these externals were symbolic of those of the church itself whose inner life was veiled in mystery and, as a result, became an expression of the unseen presence of God in the midst of the world, one that invited those reflecting on them to struggle with their implications?

THE "CO-INCIDENCE"

These questions, however, prompt us to go deeper into the mysteries of the San Damiano and to reflect further on the etymology of the word "symbol." If the Greek σύμβολον (*sýmbolon*) comes from the root words συν- (*syn-*) meaning "together" and βολή (*bolē*) "a throw," then it could be translated as something "thrown together" or literally a "co-incidence." In God's providence, we might suppose, Francis and Clare were "thrown together" or "co-incided" in fulfilling the ecclesial mandate heard before the cross: by Francis in his enterprise of rebuilding materially that small church of San Damiano; by Clare in making of it a "school" of poor contemplative women learning to carry out the activities of the Lord's Spirit.

It is understandable why the popes, Innocent III and Honorius III, embraced Francis and his followers as enthusiastically as they did and why Hugolino as papal legate and later pope protected and advanced their cause so forcibly. From the very first, Innocent III recognized that the intuitions of Bishop Guido of Assisi and Cardinal John of St. Paul were correct: Francis and his followers would be valuable instruments of rebuilding the Church. The details provided by the *Anonymous of Perugia* and amended in the *Legend of the*

Three Companions describe, as we know, how the Gospel intuition of Francis was brought into the ecclesial structures by Innocent III. Imposing a juridical structure on their Gospel initiative may seem today to some as stifling—we need only think of John Holland Smith’s characterization of the *Later Rule* as “The Death of a Vision.”⁹⁶ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, however, asks:

hasn’t this remained the inner drama of the Franciscan order ... on the one hand, the impulse to live and preach the gospel in a radical way, which explodes the institutional framework and would prefer greater freedom, greater poverty; and, on the other hand, the necessity of finding some forms in which the whole thing can take its place in normal society? But it is precisely in virtue of this inner flame, which has repeatedly leapt beyond the confines of what is merely institutional, that the order has perceived its function within the Church in the long term.⁹⁷

Unfortunately, no account of the initial approval of the primitive way of life of Clare and the Poor Ladies exists as it does for Francis and his brothers. Was there any attempt at “finding some forms ... [for] its place in normal society” as there was for the brothers? What did prompt those popes and papal legates of Clare’s time to impose the enclosure on her and her sisters? Did they attempt—as they had for Francis—to find a different approach to this new presence of the gospel—this gospel call to live *sine proprio*—expressed by Clare? Will we ever know?

⁹⁶ John Holland Smith, *Saint Francis of Assisi* (New York: Scribner, 1972).

⁹⁷ Ratzinger, *God and the World* 395. The author continues: “In fact, the Church herself lives in this dilemma: that we all ought to be greater, we all should, in a more radical way, get out of the compromise of our lives. But then, if we must still continue to live out these compromises in the world, as we now have it, then we ought at least to carry within us the goad of this disquiet and to open our lives and that of the world to the full greatness of the gospel.”

We are left then to rely principally on the written response of Pope Honorius III to a lost letter of Cardinal Hugolino in 1218. Honorius suggests that he recognized the intuitions of his papal legate regarding the Poor Ladies, appreciated their desire to live poorly, and desired to provide for them amid the "instability of worldly prosperity."⁹⁸ In someway, however, his letter is somewhat ambiguous, particularly in its manner of granting his papal legate some leeway for caring for the material needs of these women. Hugolino's *Form of Life* for them seems to capitalize on the pope's subtle mention of "instability" by imposing the "sure and *stable* foundation for making progress" provided by the *Rule of St. Benedict*. He skillfully avoids, however, any mention of poverty and, providentially, sets the stage for Clare's role in defending, clarifying, and promoting the very means by which she envisioned living in the Church. With each challenge—at least as they are reflected in her letters to Agnes of Prague—Clare's understanding of a life *sine proprio* becomes more lucid and emphatic as does the reason for it: Christ.

If it is true, as Paul Ricouer maintains, that our reflections on a symbol embrace the past—"an archeology"—and the future—"an eschatology," then being before the crucified Christ in San Damiano must have led Clare, as it did Francis, through a lifetime of challenge and promise.⁹⁹ The "co-incidence" of San Damiano lies in that small church becoming the biblical *propitiatorium*, the mercy seat of the holy of holies, where Christ spoke to Francis and where Christ entered each day for forty-one years into union with Clare.¹⁰⁰

The experiences of her first twenty-two years (1212-1234) in San Damiano, those years before her first letter to Agnes of Prague, act as a lens through which, as we have seen, we may discern the lessons Clare learned from being poor. They may

⁹⁸ Pope Honorius III, "Letter to Cardinal Hugolino," in *The Lady*, 71-2.

⁹⁹ See McKenna, *Symbol*, 28.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. This is the imagery Bonaventure uses in the *Soul's Journey into God* where, in Chapter V, he envisions the poor contemplative reflecting on the God of the Old Testament ("I am Who am") and, in Chapter VI, the God of the New ("One alone is good"). Both come together in reflecting on Christ.

be seen, in other words, as offering a hermeneutical perspective from which to interpret those three letters Clare writes to Agnes between 1234 and 1238. Aside from learning from her *Testament* that, “although physically weak and frail,” she and sisters “did not shirk deprivation, poverty, hard work, trial...,” we know little of those years. Yet we do know that by 1219 they had made an impression upon Hugolino and that by 1228, after Francis’s death, she had entered into the struggle to preserve the character of their poor life. That first letter to Agnes, however, shows, in 1234, the passion of her desire to honor the commitment she had made to live poorly, while the following two letters how intensely that passion grew.

Nonetheless, it is worth repeating the different expressions of Francis and Clare for, as we saw, the means of expressing their commitment became quite different, although the goal they shared was very much the same: the rebuilding of the house of God. His was a poverty that was freeing in that it enabled him to travel in pursuit of proclaiming the kingdom of God as the Gospel’s missionary discourse mandated; hers was rooted to a place, to the small world of a monastery in which the mysteries of the kingdom were embodied, lived out in a more tangible way. His was a poverty that permitted a degree of independence so that one could seek employment or, if necessary, beg for alms; hers did not since it was dependent on the generosity of others: those who would beg in their place and those who would generously provide for their needs.

In treatment of the theology of the symbol, Karl Rahner devotes considerable attention to what he calls the “symbolic reality” that expresses or embodies a person or thing so strongly and is so charged with meaning, that it renders the other present.¹⁰¹ A century before Clare, Hugh of St. Victor captured a similar theology in writing of the love of God expressed in Christ: “I feel, O my soul, such is the power of love that you are being transformed into the likeness of him

¹⁰¹ Karl Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” *Theological Investigations* IV, tr. K. Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966), 221-52.

you love."¹⁰² Clare undoubtedly expressed it differently. She writes in her second letter to Agnes: "As a poor virgin, embrace the poor Christ ... Gaze, consider, contemplate, desiring to imitate Your Spouse ..." ¹⁰³ "Place your mind before the mirror of eternity," she urges her in the third. ¹⁰⁴ "Gaze upon that mirror each day, ... that Mirror, suspended on the wood of the Cross," she exclaims in her last. ¹⁰⁵

Ultimately the daily hidden lives of the poor women of San Damiano championed in stable, rarely-changing ways the reality and fidelity of the love of God. In the meanwhile, the activities and words of the poor brothers in the world challenged its ever-changing values by calling women and men to a life of conversion. In some ways the silent, enclosed witness of Clare and her sisters, however, articulated more forcefully the profound interior disposition that prompts the acceptance of being poor. As Benedict XVI observes in his commentary of the first beatitude:

These are people who know that their poverty has an interior dimension; they are lovers who simply want to let God bestow his gifts upon them and thereby to live in inner harmony with God's nature and word.... They come with empty hands; not with hands that grasp and clutch, but with hands that open and give and thus are ready to receive from God's bountiful goodness. ¹⁰⁶

If it was that repeated experience of "God's bountiful goodness" that Clare and her sisters enjoyed during those first years in San Damiano, then, as confident lovers, they became ever more eager to be receptive of God's love. Once again the

¹⁰² Hugh of St. Victor, *De arrha animae* (PL 176, 954); *Soliloquy on the Earnest Money of the Soul*, translated with introduction by Kevin Herbert (Marquette, WI: Marquette University Press, 1956), 16.

¹⁰³ Clare, Second Letter 18, 20 in *The Lady*, 49.

¹⁰⁴ Clare, Third Letter 12 in *The Lady*, 51.

¹⁰⁵ Clare, Fourth Letter 15, 24, in *The Lady*, 55, 56.

¹⁰⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Doubleday, 2007), 76.

words of Thérèse come to mind: “It is confidence and confidence alone that leads to love.”¹⁰⁷ Herein is the secret of Clare’s passionate defense of poverty and her unique role in the contemplative life of the Church: love, the love of one who is poor.

ENTER HERMES AND HIS TORTOISE

At this point we might profit by returning once more to etymology, in this case of the etymological roots of “hermeneutics,” the art of interpretation, and those of “symbol,” the two-dimensional means of expression. Curiously both find their foundations in the seventh century B.C.E. *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* in which the mythological, precocious son of Zeus, Hermes, climbs from his crib and discovers a gift of the gods: a tortoise that provides him endless delight. “When he found it,” the myth continues, “the helpful son of Zeus ... won boundless bliss, laughed when he saw it and straightway said:

συμβολον ηδη μοι [A symbol/co-incidence/omen of great fortune for me so soon!] I don’t despise you. Hail, O shapely hooper and companion of the feast, sounding at the dance! Your sight is welcome! Whence this lovely toy, the gleaming shell that clothes you, covering, a tortoise living on the mountains? But I shall take you and bring you inside; you’ll profit me. And I shall not dishonor you for you will serve me first. Better to be inside; being at the gates is harmful for you.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Supra.

¹⁰⁸ Homer, “Hymn to Hermes” 30-36 in *The Homeric Hymns*, translation, Introduction, and Notes by Apostolos N. Athanassakis (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976), 31-32.

As this section of the tale ends, we see Hermes taking the tortoise in both hands and returning into the house with his charming toy in his arms.

We might chuckle at this image of Hermes and the tortoise in these reflections.¹⁰⁹ The external characteristics of a tortoise, however, enabled ancient cultures to see in it a rich symbol. Hinduism, for example, saw the tortoise as a rich symbol of spiritual maturity, whereas Chinese mythology frequently highlights it as a symbol of wisdom.¹¹⁰ Its physical form, long life, relatively slow pace of travel, suggested spiritual values such as enduring patience, stamina for survival, and courage in hopeless situations; as long or eternal life and revered old age. Among peoples of the Mojave and Colorado deserts of North America, one tribe, the Chemehuevi, saw the "turtle" as a symbol of the spirit of their people and respected its aura of sacredness.¹¹¹ Attractive as the "gleaming," protective shell discovered by Hermes, may have been to these peoples what made it be a "companion of the feast" and a "shapely hooper" at the dance. What made it such an appealing symbol, however, was what gave it life. In this sense, the tortoise might be an apt symbol for San Damiano with its shell, the enclosure, protecting "the life of the Spirit within."

In order to get beyond the external "shell" we should return once more to the *Form of Life* Francis entrusted to Clare and the inner life it describes.¹¹² Practically speaking the dynamics of Francis's proposal envision a life in which daily the hearing and fulfilling the word of God is paramount, as is the example of Mary, the woman of silence whom Jesus himself proposes as the model discipleship (cf. Luke 11:27-28; see

¹⁰⁹ I did until I googled "symbol of tortoise" and found a website with the address: www.thelady.com/clara. An omen?

¹¹⁰ Cf. Derek Walters, *Chinese Astrology: Interpreting the Revelations of the Celestial Messengers* (Wellingborough, Northamptonshire: Aquarian Press, 1987); David Leeming, *A Dictionary of Asian Mythology* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹¹¹ Cf. Joan S. Schnedier, "The Desert Tortoise and Early Peoples of the Western Deserts," A Special Report prepared for the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee. March 1996; C. Laird, *The Chemehuevis* (Banning, CA: Malki Museum Press, 1976); R. Beals, "The Contemporary Culture of the Cahita Indians," *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin*, No. 142

¹¹² Cf. *supra* 9-13.

also Matt 12:46-50; Mark 3:31-35; Luke 8:19-21). Theologically speaking, moreover, the dynamics of Francis's proposal flow from the sacrament of Baptism and, in this light, the biblical "man of desire" came to appreciate, as did Clare, the singular role of the "Spirit of the Lord and His holy activity." That alone was necessary: the gift of the Spirit, the gift of Baptism. To be followers of Francis and Clare, it could be argued, is to enter, as must every baptized Christian, into the mystagogy of Easter.¹¹³

It was their commitment to living this baptismal life *sine proprio*, however, that made all the difference. Their indefatigable embrace of poverty empowered them to empty themselves totally, to become "like an empty shell in which God can pour out an abundance of his gifts."¹¹⁴ Receiving implies accepting or having a capacity or readiness to be given. Perhaps therein do we find the greatness of Francis and Clare: for them holiness was not an enterprise of achievement, it was one of receptivity, a process of self-emptying through which they received the spirit of holiness.¹¹⁵ To acknowledge this is to appreciate what Bonaventure wrote early in his theological career: "To become holy is nothing other than to

¹¹³ In this regard, the 17 June 2007 address of Pope Benedict XVI to the clergy and religious of Assisi is most apropos: "If we are speaking today of Francis's conversion, thinking of the radical life choice he made as a young man, we cannot forget that his first 'conversion' took place in the gift of Baptism. The full response which he was to give as an adult would merely be the ripening of the seed of holiness that he received then. It is important that we have a deeper awareness of the baptismal dimension of holiness in our life and in our pastoral approach. It is a gift and a duty for all the baptized."

¹¹⁴ John Paul II, Letter to the Poor Clares, *L'Osservatore Romano*, English Edition, August 25, 1993.

¹¹⁵ The words of Pope Benedict XVI concerning the "poor in spirit" are apropos here: "Silently evolving here was the attitude before God that Paul explored in his theology of justification: These are people who do not flaunt their achievements before God. They do not stride into God's presence as if they were partners able to engage with him on an equal footing; they do not lay claim to a reward for what they have done. These are people who know that their poverty has an interior disposition; they are lovers who simply want to let God bestow his gifts upon them and thereby to live in inner harmony with God's nature and word." *Jesus of Nazareth*, 76.

receive the grace of the Holy Spirit."¹¹⁶ At the end of his life, therefore, he provided what may be the simple formula for the holiness exemplified in both Francis and Clare: "The law of holiness is the law of grace," that is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

This Spirit-filled life as poor beneficiaries of God brings us back to Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger's comments on the close relationship between pneumatology and spirituality. "Reflecting on 'Christian spirituality,'" as he suggests, "means talking about the Holy Spirit, who is making himself known when human life receives a new center; talking about the Holy Spirit includes looking at people to whom he has given himself."¹¹⁷ How then did Francis discern the activities of the Spirit of the Lord in Clare and the Poor Ladies? The first half of the *Canticle of Exhortation* he wrote for them provides some insights:

Listen, little poor ones called by the Lord
 who've come together
 from many parts and provinces.
 Live always in truth
 that you may die in obedience.
 Do not look at life without
 for that of the Spirit is better.¹¹⁸

Francis's companions tell us that he composed this at the same time as his *Canticle of Brother Sun*, that is, in the Spring of 1225. Indeed, there are similarities in the two texts that go beyond the phenomenon that they both come to us in Umbrian dialect. There are strong Trinitarian underpinnings in both. Curiously, Francis's long-overlooked canticle to the Poor Ladies may provide some of the most profound in-

¹¹⁶ Bonaventure, *IV Sent.*, d. 6, p. 2, a. 1, q. 2, f. 2: ... *santificari non est aliud quam gratiam Spiritus sancti recipere* (IV 151a).

¹¹⁷ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "The Holy Spirit as Communion," in *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion*, edited by Stephan Otto Horn and Vinzenz Pfnür, translated by Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 38.

¹¹⁸ Francis of Assisi, *Canticle of Exhortation* 1-3, in *The Saint*, FA:ED 1, 115; *The Lady*, 394.

sights into the “co-incidence” of San Damiano. “Called by the Lord ... to live ... in truth ... the life of the Spirit, [the] little poor ones from many parts and provinces” *come together* to mirror the inner life of the Triune God.

Francis’s recognition that it is the Lord who calls them to “come together,” may provide the best insights into his understanding of the activity of Holy Spirit.¹¹⁹ If the Spirit is named by what is divine about God, that is, what is held in common by the Father and the Son—“holy” and “spirit,” then his nature is in fact this: being the *communion* of the Father and the Son and his particular quality is to be unity. If Baptism gives us new life in the Spirit, it follows that becoming a Christian means becoming “communion.” Being “spiritual,” therefore, has an essential implication of coming together as one, of mirroring the inner life, the “comm-union” of the Triune God. “The very names ‘Father’ and ‘Son’ express what is particular to the first and second Persons of the Trinity, the giving and receiving, being as giving and being as receiving, as word and answer, yet so fully one that this results, not in subordination, but in unity ...”¹²⁰ The activity of the Spirit is, therefore, described in keeping with the nature of God himself, Personal. The Spirit’s presence with us, however, demands that the process of growing “spiritual” is never-ending. It is an expression of the activity of the ever-living God within us and, as such, is ever-expansive, never resting until it brings all into one—“May they be one as we are one” (John 17: 20, 23).

It is Francis’s further acknowledgment that these *povereille* [the little poor ones] are called into this oneness from “many parts and provinces” that expresses a deeper dimension of this Trinitarian life. In a frequently overlooked phrase in his *Earlier Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance*, Francis writes: “*ut sint sanctificati in unum sicut et nos*

¹¹⁹ I am once again most indebted to the insights of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger’s article, “The Holy Spirit as Communion,” for what follows in these next paragraphs. They have enabled me to bring into focus many distinctions between *communitas* and *fraternitas* with which I have wrestled in the fog of my understanding of the spirituality of Francis and Clare.

¹²⁰ Ratzinger, *The Holy Spirit*, 41.

[may they be *holy in being* one as we are one]."¹²¹ Note that he adds to Jesus' prayer in John's Gospel: "... *sanctificati* [be holy in being]" suggesting, it would seem, that our efforts to grow in holiness are tied to our efforts to grow in oneness. It is his awareness that these women came from far and wide into a restricted, poor, and stark dwelling that makes Francis's encouragement so meaningful. Living together for long periods of time in a confined environment was difficult enough; doing so as poor human beings dependent upon one another amid the vicissitudes of daily life was even more. Only in the Spirit could these women be empowered to persevere in coming together as one. In doing so, they gave evidence of how the Spirit becomes interchangeable with love and manifests His primary activity: the love that unites and draws into an abiding unity.¹²²

Thomas of Celano's praise of the virtues of the Poor Ladies in 1228 is significant in this regard. The first characteristic of their lives that he singles out is their mutual and continual charity "that binds their wills together ... Forty or fifty of them can dwell together in one place, *idem velle et idem nolle* [wanting and not wanting the same thing] forming one spirit in them out of many."¹²³ Twenty-five years later Rainaldo underscored the wonder of their life of "comm-union" when, in his introductory letter to Clare's *Form of Life*, he

¹²¹ Cf. Francis, *Earlier Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance* I 18. Cf. *The Saint*, FA:ED 1, 42.

¹²² Taking the First Letter of John as his starting point, Augustine accentuated John's simple statement: "God is love" (1 John 4:16b) and continued to underscore John's repetition of the "abiding" presence of the divinity in the one who loves. The presence of the Holy Spirit makes itself known, Augustine claimed, in the manner of love and since love's "proper work," so to speak—and, thereby, the "proper work" of the Holy Spirit—is simply this: to abide. Cf. Ratzinger, *The Holy Spirit*, 44-46.

¹²³ Cf. Thomas of Celano, *Life of St. Francis* 19, in *The Saint*, FA:ED 1, 198; *The Lady*, 398. Cf. Benedict XVI, *God is Love*, 17: "Acknowledgment of the living God is one path towards love, and the 'yes' of our will to his will unites our intellect, will and sentiments in the all-embracing act of love. But this process is always open-ended; love is never 'finished' and complete; throughout life, it changes and matures, and thus remains faithful to itself. *Idem velle atque idem nolle*—to want the same thing, and to reject the same thing—was recognized by antiquity as the authentic content of love: the one becomes similar to the other, and this leads to a community of will and thought."

identified their “manner of holy unity” as one of its primary characteristics.¹²⁴ Might not he have pointed this out to Innocent IV whose introductory letter—added at a later date—stresses their living “together in unity of spirits”?¹²⁵ Isn’t it curious how both men place their mention of this call to a life of oneness in the same breath as that of poverty! It is as if the two men came to appreciate how poverty made their life of comm-union so transparent. A life *sine proprio* revealed how strongly the activity of the Spirit brought them together.

It is, however, the first word of Francis’s *Cantic of Exhortation* that is most important: “Listen.” If this was written in the spring of 1225, then it is more or less contemporaneous with Francis’s *Letter to the Entire Order*. Both documents contain this same simple exhortation: “Listen.” Moreover, to both sisters and brothers, he continues by encouraging them to respond through obedience to the word of God they have heard from the Lord.¹²⁶ There is a certain consistency in his approach in this for focusing attention on the word flows from the fundamental vision of this Francis gave Clare from the very beginning: a life “according to perfection of the holy Gospel.” If so, it now takes on new meaning: “Live always in truth that you may die in obedience.” Isn’t it curious, though, that he now accentuates living “in truth” and dying “in obedience.” “Glorify them in truth” is the prayer Jesus asks the Father for the apostles; it is also what Francis asks for his followers. “Your word is truth,” Jesus continues, as does Francis. While the foundations of his encouragement are clearly the Gospel and Letters of John (John 17:17; 2 John 4; 3 John 3), the First Letter of Peter provides another perspective:

Purifying your souls in obedience to the truth *ad fraternitatis amorem non fictum* [for a love of brotherhood that is not false], love one another earnestly from the heart; you have been born anew, not from

¹²⁴ Cf. Clare, *Form of Life*, 109.

¹²⁵ Cf. Clare, *Form of Life*, 108.

¹²⁶ In the *Letter to the Entire Order* 5-6, we find: “Listen, sons of the Lord and my brothers. Pay attention to my words. Incline the ear of your heart and obey the voice of the Son of God.” Cf. *The Saint*, FA:ED 1, 116-17.

perishable but from imperishable seed, through the living and abiding word of God; for "all flesh is like the grass and all its glory like the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord abides forever."¹²⁷

Resignation in obedience to the truth is what purifies one's love of others simply because of the "yes" to the living word of God it demands, the criterion of love it presents, and the transparency it inspires. Listening and responding to, that is, growing in that word guarantees a gospel life among sisters or brothers that is genuine and abiding. The ambiguity of Francis's encouragement to "Live always in truth that you may die in obedience" may be yet another instance of his respect for the role of "divine inspiration," the Spirit present in scripture. It may well be proof of the conviction of Francis and Clare that the life of the poor reveals in a unique way the mysterious power of the "living and abiding word" of the poor Christ, Whose words are "spirit and life" (John 6:63) and, as Isaiah spoke of it, the food of the poor" (Isa 55:1-11). It may well be an indication of the awareness of both Francis and Clare that another activity of the Spirit is never to point to Itself but to the other: "My spirit and the Spirit of Christ cry out 'Abba, Father!'" and "It is only in the Spirit that we can cry out 'Jesus is Lord!'"

Francis's encouragement to listen prompts yet another return to Clare's own words to these poor women, her sisters:

Among the other gifts that we have received and continue to receive from our magnanimous Father of mercies and for which we must express the deepest thanks to our glorious God, there is our vocation, which the more perfect and greater it is, the more we are indebted to him.

¹²⁷ 1Peter 1:22-25. In place of *in obedientia caritatis in fraternitate amore simplici* ... the *Nova Vulgata Bibliorum Sacrorum Editio* has: *in obedientia veritatis ad fraternitatis amorem non fictum* ... Cf. Optatus van Asseldonk, "Biblical Teachings in the Writings of St. Francis of Assisi," *Gryffriars Review* 3 (1989): 308.

Those words of Clare's *Testament* come to us after years of living within the confines of San Damiano where day-by-day, year-by-year Clare would have awaited the "living and abiding word" of the crucified Christ before whom Francis had received his mission. It is all a matter of gift.

As a woman, Clare would hardly have ignored the women depicted on the cross of San Damiano.¹²⁸ At some point, she must have gazed upon and considered each of them: on the one side, Mary, the Mother of Jesus; on the other, the two Marys, the wife of Clopas, and the Magalene (John 19: 25). Now more than the others, though, it must have been the Mother of Jesus who absorbed her thoughts as she stands with a paradoxical slight smile pointing to the side of her crucified Son from whose side flows blood and water (John 19:34). If the Gospel of John is such a primary influence on the crucifix of San Damiano, then Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman in which he asks for the "gift" of water must have deepened Clare's appreciation of Mary's gesture.

Jesus asks the woman for water in order to reveal himself as the giver of living water.¹²⁹ "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water" (John 4:10). On the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths, the commemoration of the wanderings in the desert, Jesus continues this theme. For the seven days of the Feast water was carried from the Pool of Siloam to the temple in remembrance of the water from the rock in the desert (Num 20-2-13). "On the last day of the feast," John narrates, "the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed:

"Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as scripture says: 'Rivers of living water will flow from within him.'" He said this in reference to the Spirit that those who came to believe

¹²⁸ Cf. Michael D. Guinan, *The Franciscan Vision and the Gospel of John*, The Franciscan Heritage Series Volume Four (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2006), 9-12.

¹²⁹ Once again, I am indebted to Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger for this interpretation as he plumbs the depths of Augustine's identification of the Spirit as "gift." Cf. Ratzinger, *The Holy Spirit*, 46-50.

in him were to receive. There was, of course, no Spirit yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified (John 7:37-39).

Clare may well have reflected that her calling, in ways similar to those of Mary, the Mother of God, was to point as well to the crucified Christ and the gift of living water. "If you knew the gift of God ..."

These thoughts bring us once again to the crucifix of San Damiano, this time to its depiction of Christ's Ascension and the finger of the right hand of the Father. "Grace was given to each of us," Paul writes in the Letter to the Ephesians, "according to the measure of Christ's gift. When he ascended on high he...gave gifts to men" (Eph 4: 7-8). The gifts of the gift: what Paul describes as so many manifestations of the presence of the Spirit given in the one body (1Cor 12:4-11) in order to build it (Eph 4:12)! It is not impossible that Clare meditated on these passages as she reflected on the words Francis heard from the crucifix and wondered about her own role in the rebuilding of San Damiano. What gifts had the Gift given to her, this poor enclosed woman called, as was Francis, to lead others in living the Gospel? Was she, like he, not called to use those gifts in ways that went far beyond this small, impoverished church on the slopes of Subasio? In this light, is not the mandate she gave to her sisters, like that of Francis to his brothers, a call to gift others for the building of the Church Universal, a call, in other words, to manifest "the Spirit of the Lord and his holy activity"?

THE CAPRICIOUS HEART OF HERMES

In conclusion, we should return to the tale of Hermes and his tortoise where we left the child taking this fortuitous gift in both hands, going back into the house and placing his charming toy in his crib. In a moment of serendipitous insight, however, the young boy later imagines a new kind of potential for the tortoise. "Indeed," he says, "alive you shall be a charm against baneful witchcraft; and if you die, your

singing shall be beautiful." Impetuously he cuts off its limbs, scoops out its marrow, and fastens seven strings to it making of it the first lyre with which he sings of Zeus, of love, of his adventures, and of his dreams of conquest. As Hermes sings of all these, however, his heart turns to other dreams prompting him to place the hollow shell back in his sacred cradle, leave his dwelling, and search for a place, where, crying over the loss of his tortoise, he might ponder the capricious trickery of his heart.¹³⁰

"Attend to the subject, the activity, the doctrine, or the meaning," the second century Emperor Marcus Aurelius exhorted his readers. "You deserve to suffer this; so you would rather become good tomorrow than be good today."¹³¹ Thomas of Celano may well have had that in mind when, in his *Life of Saint Francis*, he dwells upon the symbolic meanings of the names: Francis "whose heart was so frank and free," and Clare, "clearly a woman of true brilliance."¹³² With each reading of their writings and their lives, it becomes clearer that they were both transparent expressions of what made them what they were: "the Spirit of the Lord and his holy activity." Marcus Aurelius offers another piece of somewhat similar advice which seems most apropos when reflecting on San Damiano: "Look to what is within: do not allow the intrinsic quality or the worth of any one fact escape you."¹³³

All things Franciscan set us in one way or another on the road to San Damiano: the "co-incidence of San Damiano." This is where Francis and Clare found their strength, where they welcomed their joy, and where they directed their hearts. "Happy are those whose strength is in you," sang the psalmist, "in whose hearts are the roads to Zion." Zion: the ancient Jebusite fortress conquered by David (2Sm 6:1-5), the site of the Ark of the Covenant (2 Sm 5:6-9)! Zion: the

¹³⁰ Homer, *Hymn to Hermes* 36-65.

¹³¹ *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus* VIII 22, translated by A.S.L. Farquharson; and a selection from the *Letters of Marcus and Fronto*, translated by R.B. Rutherford, with introduction and notes by R.B. Rutherford (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 44.

¹³² Thomas of Celano, *Life of St. Francis* 120, 116, in *The Saint*, FA:ED 1, 290, 285.

¹³³ *Meditations* VI 3.

source of strength, of wisdom, of joy, of consolation! Zion: the "city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (Heb 12:22)! It is to Zion, to the Church, to San Damiano that the hearts of Brother Francis and the Lady Clare lead us!

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