

## Francis – Clare – Jesus – in Gospel Harmony

*A Study for Secular Franciscans –*

While SFOs are clearly encouraged, even expected, to be in frequent contact with the writings of St. Francis, the witness of Franciscan living that St. Clare brought to our world highlights an amazing harmony of spirit. The SFO General Constitutions indicate in article 44 that they should also include some acquaintance with the writings of St. Clare as ongoing formation. Some fraternities have found this difficult to do.

Heavy reliance in this series on the Testament of St. Clare will help us to appreciate this close personal and spiritual relationship of Francis and Clare. Clare also manifests her own distinctive feminine absorption of the rich and challenging Gospel message.

Clare's Testament will serve as the basis for this study. Of course St. Clare is writing here to her Sisters, and not to the SFOs (or Third Order). Keep in mind that the estimated date of its writing is around the 1250s, just before St. Clare died, and about 25 years after the death of Francis.

Her **Testament** is NOT a summary of her life (not an autobiography)

Her **Testament** is NOT a summary of their way of life (you have to read their Rule to find that). She presumes the reader is familiar with their Rule.

Here she wants to assure everyone that their foundations as an Order rely on the Church and on St. Francis.

...session one...

**A Necessary Preliminary** to this study:

In order to be enriched by St. Clare's **Testament**, you must know some details about her life.

This can be done by reading one of the books on St. Clare.

My recommendation is to simply read pp. 34 to 41 in the little booklet entitled "The Poverello: St. Francis of Assisi" by Mark Hegener, ofm, which many SFOs have. Then reflect on the following.

For sharing:

Q1. What would you list as key elements of Clare's faith-life?

Q2. Is it safe to say that the prayer of the *Poor Ladies* (later called *Poor Clares*) invariably focused on Jesus Christ, as seen so often in the Scriptures and in reverence for the Eucharist?

Q3. To get some perspective between the ages of Francis and Clare, find their years of birth and compare. (Francis was 30 when Clare came to make her profession at the Portiuncula.)

Q4. How casual ("automatic?") am I when I receive God in Holy Communion?

Q5. Do I ever take time to visit with Jesus in a church or chapel? ...partake of holy hours?

Q6. What essential messages of our faith can be realized and lived in receiving the Communion at the Sacrifice of the Mass?

Q7. How would you describe the atmosphere of the monastery of San Damiano during those first ten years?

Q8. What kind of a person was Clare?

Q9. What priorities had Clare set for herself (list at least 3)?

Q10. What did Clare and Francis have in common in their faith-lives?

...session two...

And now to St. Clare's Testament:

### **Testament of St. Clare of Assisi\***

\*one of multiple such translations of her Testament

In the name of the Lord! Amen.

#### **- *Gratitude for their Vocation (1)***

<sup>1</sup>Among the multiple gifts that we have received and daily receive from our giver of goodness, the Father of mercies, is our vocation for which we must express the deepest thanks to the glorious Father of Christ. In addition, since this vocation is all the more perfect and great, so we owe the greatest thanks to Him.

Recall that the Apostle states: "Know your calling". For us the Son of God has been made the Way, which our blessed father Francis, His true lover and imitator, has shown and taught us by word and example.

Therefore, beloved sisters, we must consider the awesome gifts that God has showered upon us, especially those that He has seen fit to develop in us through His beloved servant, our blessed father Francis, not only after our conversion but also while we had been living in the vanities of the world.

For sharing:

Q2-1. What is a testament? What is the purpose of a testament? (Have you read and studied St. Francis' Testament?)

Q2-2. Do we help our children reflect on and find their gift of a vocation? (See SFO Rule, art. 17.)

Q2-3. Do we treasure our own vocation to the SFO in the same way that Clare speaks of? How do we show that?

Q2-4. What does it mean when Clare says: "living in the vanities of the world"?

...session three...

#### **- *Francis' Forecast & their Response: (2-3-4)***

<sup>2</sup>In fact, almost immediately after his conversion, when he had neither brothers nor companions, while he was repairing the church of San Damiano, where he was completely gifted by divine consolation and encouraged to completely abandon the world, the holy man through the great joy and enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, made a prophecy about us that the Lord later fulfilled.

Climbing the stone-works of that church, he shouted in French to some poor people who were standing nearby: “Come and help me in the construction of the monastery of San Damiano, because ladies are yet to live here who by their good reputation and holy manner of life will glorify our heavenly Father throughout His holy, universal Church”.

<sup>3</sup>Here we see the abundant goodness of God to us. Because of His mercy and love, He saw fit to proclaim these words through His saint about our vocational choice. And our most blessed father prophesied not only for us, but also for those who would come to this holy vocation to which the Lord has called us.

Therefore we must keep the commandments of our God and Father with such eagerness and fervor of mind and body. In this way with the help of the Lord we may return to Him an increase of His talent.

<sup>4</sup>For the Lord Himself has placed us not only as a pattern for others as example and mirror, but also for our sisters whom the Lord has called to our way of life, so that they in turn might be a mirror and example to those living in the world. Since the Lord has called us to such great things that those who are to be a mirror and example to others may be reflected in us, we are greatly bound to bless and praise God and be all the more strengthened to do good in the Lord.

Therefore, if we live according to the style explained earlier, we shall leave to others a noble example and with very little effort win the prize of eternal happiness.

For sharing:

Q3-1. What is meant by “that we may return to Him an increase of His talent”?

Q3-2. What is meant by “to leave to others a noble example”?

Q3-3. Where are the Poor Clares located today in your area? Has your SFO fraternity, as part of the franciscan family, ever visited or helped any of them in your area?

Q3-4. To whom does St. Clare attribute their vocational call?

...session four...

#### **- Clare's life of conversion following Francis: (5 & 6)**

<sup>5</sup>The most high heavenly Father chose in His mercy and grace to enlighten my heart that I should do penance according to the example and instruction of our most blessed father Francis a short while after his conversion. So I, together with a few sisters whom the Lord had given me after my conversion, willingly promised him obedience as the Lord gave us the light of His grace through his wonderful life and teaching.

Blessed Francis saw that even though we were physically weak and frail, we did not shirk deprivation, poverty, hard work, trial, or the shame or contempt of the world – rather, we considered them as great delights. So when he had frequently observed us according to the pattern of the saints and his brothers – he greatly rejoiced in the Lord. And moved by sincere concern for us he bound himself, both through himself and through his Order, to always have the same loving care and special solicitude for us as for his own brothers.

<sup>6</sup>And so, by the will of God and our most blessed father Francis, we went to dwell in the Church of San Damiano. There, in a short while the Lord through His mercy and grace made our number increase so that He would fulfill what He had proclaimed earlier through His saint.

In fact, we had previously stayed in another place, but only for a short time. After that he wrote a form of life for us, emphasizing that we always persevere in holy poverty.

For sharing:

Q4-1. Do you know the date for this important event when Clare “promised him obedience”?

Q4-2. What impressions do you get from the attitude toward significant difficulties that Clare lists here?

Q4-3. What is Clare’s understanding of the close commitment by Francis to them?

Q4-4. Have you ever read the short, simple rule that Clare identifies here: “...he wrote a form of life for us”?

Q4-5. Do we share Clare’s appreciation for what St. Francis offers us as SFOs?

...session five...

**- *Living & Loving holy poverty: (7-8-9)***

<sup>7</sup>While he was living he was not content to only encourage us with many words and examples to the love of holy poverty and its observance, but he also presented us with many writings, so that after his death we would in no way turn away from it, as the Son of God never wished to abandon this holy poverty while He lived in the world.

Having imitated His footprints, our most blessed father Francis never departed either in example or in teaching from this holy poverty that he had chosen for himself and his brothers.

Therefore, I, Clare, a handmaid of Christ and of the Poor Sisters of the Monastery of San Damiano – although unworthy – and the little plant of the holy father, together with my sisters esteemed so lofty a [religious] profession and the command of such a father and also ourselves being fearful about the frailty of some others after the passing of our holy father Francis, who was our solid pillar and, after God, our one consolation and support.

Again and again we willingly bound ourselves to our Lady most holy Poverty, that after my death, the sisters, those present and those to come, would never turn away from her.

<sup>8</sup>And as I have always been most zealous and solicitous to observe and to have the others observe the holy poverty that we have promised to the Lord and our holy father Francis, so, too, the others who will succeed me in office should be always bound to observe holy poverty with the help of God and have it observed by the other sisters. Keep in mind that for greater security I took care to have our profession of the most holy poverty that we promised our father to be strengthened with privileges by the Lord Pope Innocent, during whose pontificate we had our beginning, and by his other successors, that we would never nor in any way turn away from her.

<sup>9</sup>For this reason, on bended knees and bowing low with my whole being, I beseech all my sisters, both those present and those to come, the holy Mother the Roman Church, the supreme Pontiff, and, especially, the Lord Cardinal who has been appointed for the Order of Friars Minor and for us, that out of love of the God Who was

placed poor in the crib, lived poor in the world, and remained naked on the cross, [our Protector] may always see to it that his little flock, which the Lord Father has begotten in His holy Church by the word and example of our blessed father Francis to follow the poverty and humility of His beloved Son and His glorious Virgin Mother, observe the holy poverty that we have promised to God and our most blessed father Saint Francis. May he always encourage and support them in these things.

For sharing:

Q5-1. Clare proposes three persons as models for their lives of poverty – namely? Are these appropriate for us?

Q5-2. Today we call this “Second Order” the “Poor Clares”. What title did St. Clare use for themselves? What other names (titles) have been used through the centuries?

Q5-3. Read SFO Rule, art. 8. What appeal is made here for SFO members?

Q5-4. What is meant by the term “privilege of poverty”?

Q5-5. What is the role of the “Lord Cardinal”?

...session six...

**- *Solicitude for and bond with Poor Clares by Francis and the Order: (10)***

<sup>10</sup>And as the Lord gave us our most blessed father Francis as a founder, planter, and helper in the service of Christ and in those matters we have promised to God and to our blessed father, who while he was living was always solicitous in word and in deed to cherish and take care of us, his plant, so I commend and leave my sisters, both those present and those to come, to the successor of our blessed father Francis and to the entire Order, that they may always help us to progress in serving God more perfectly and, above all, to observe more perfectly most holy poverty.

For sharing:

Q6-1. Make a list of the terms Clare uses for St. Francis here.

Q6-2. What does Clare see as the primary assistance from the friars?

Q6-3. What particular relationships are expected between the SFO and the friars? (...both ways?)

...session seven...

**- *Their way of life in community: (11-12-13)***

<sup>11</sup>If such mentioned sisters ever leave and go elsewhere, let them be bound, after my death, wherever they may be, to observe that same form of poverty that we have promised God and our most blessed father Francis.

Nevertheless, let both the sister who is in office as well as the other sisters exercise such care and foresight that they do not acquire or receive more land about the place than extreme necessity requires for a vegetable garden. But if, for the integrity and privacy of the monastery, it becomes necessary to have more land beyond the limits of the garden, no more should be acquired than extreme necessity demands. This land should not be cultivated or planted but remain always untouched and undeveloped.

<sup>12</sup>In the Lord Jesus Christ, I admonish and exhort all my sisters, both those present and those to come, to strive always to imitate the way of holy simplicity, humility and poverty

and the integrity of our holy way of living, as we were taught from the beginning of our conversion by Christ and by our blessed father Francis.

May the Father of mercies always spread from them the fragrance of a good name, both among those who are far away as well as those who are near, not by any merits of ours but by the sole mercy and grace of His goodness.

And loving one another with the charity of Christ, may the love you have in your hearts be shown outwardly in your deeds so that, compelled by such an example, the sisters may always grow in love of God and in charity for one another.

<sup>13</sup>I also beg that the one who will be in office for the sisters to strive to exceed the others more by her virtues and holy life than by her office, so that, stimulated by her example, they obey her not so much because of her office as because of love.

Let her also be discerning and attentive to her sisters as a good mother is to her daughters, and let her take care especially to provide for them according to the needs of each one out of the alms that the Lord shall give.

Let her also be so kind and approachable that they may safely reveal their needs and confidently have recourse to her at any hour, as they see fit both for themselves and their sisters.

Let the sisters who are subjects, however, keep in mind that they have given up their own wills for the sake of the Lord. Therefore I want them to obey their mother of their own free will as they have promised the Lord, so that by seeing the charity, humility and unity they have toward one another, their mother might bear all the burdens of her office more easily, and, through their way of life, that which is painful and bitter might be changed into sweetness.

For sharing:

Q7-1. List some of the daily virtues Clare calls for in this section. Can you describe each of them?

Q7-2. What can be said of the expected care and behavior of the community's superior?

...session eight...

**- *Perseverance in their P.C. Vocation: (14-15)***

<sup>14</sup>And because the way and path is difficult and the gate through which one passes and enters into life is narrow, there are few who walk along it as well as enter through it. And if there are some who walk that path for a while, there are very few who persevere on it. But how blessed are those to whom it has been given to walk that way and to persevere till the end.

For that reason let us be very careful that, if we have started on the path of the Lord, we do not at any time turn

away from it through our own failure or neglect or ignorance, so that we do not offend so great a Lord and His Virgin Mother, and our blessed father Francis, the Church Triumphant and even the Church Militant. For it is written: "Those who turn away from your commands are cursed".

<sup>15</sup>For this reason I bend my knee to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ that, through the supportive merits of the glorious and holy Virgin Mary, His Mother, and of our most blessed father Francis and all the saints, the Lord Himself Who has given a good beginning will also give the increase and final perseverance. Amen.

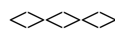
So that our way of life may be better observed, I leave you this writing, my very dear and beloved sisters, those present and those to come, as a sign of the goodness of the Lord and of our most blessed father Francis and of my blessing, your mother and servant.

For sharing:

Q8-1. How does St. Clare indicate the need for perseverance – not being fickle in their commitment?

Q8-2. Who gets offended if we choose not to persevere? Does this also apply to Secular Franciscans?

Q8-3. How does Clare's imagery parallel the image which St. Francis used with the friars in their Rule (chap.2) when he quotes S.Scripture: *no one who puts a hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God.*



An overview:

Q8-4. Throughout her Testament, how often does Clare mention Francis? Try counting them.

Q8-5. Has this Testament helped you to envision St. Clare after listening to her tell you about their vocational commitments?

Next, for a greater appreciation and sense of St. Clare's spirituality and vision, you need to especially meditate on her four letters to Agnes of Prague. Peace.

Q11. Is the Eucharist...

-- The **basis of adoration** for me?

-- Of **making petitions**? What kinds of petitions do I make? Do I follow the suggested list of petitions the church gives us in the eucharistic prayers and other parts of the Mass?

-- Of **expressing my thanks**?

-- Of **indicating my sorrow** for sins, failures, and neglect of my responsibilities?

(for both at Mass and in adoration in church).

-- The basis for **making my sacrifices** with His?

Q13. Do I ever use the prayer of Francis and the early friars when they saw a chapel or church? ("We adore you, O Lord Jesus Christ, in all the churches in the whole world, and we bless you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.")

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