

(English translation)

Bulle (Switzerland), 10 August 2003

Saint Clare and Mary

First of all, greetings to all those who are connected through the satellites and internet. ...

This year August 11th is a very important date because it marks the 750th anniversary of Saint Clare's birth in heaven in 1253. So it's a very special day for us too, and because it is so, we too would like to spend it in a particular way and we have already seen this. And we can do so because the thought I am about to present expresses something that is really very important to us. ...

In the year dedicated to Mary and to her rosary, in the year of the many, many "Marian Congresses" that have been or will be held on our planet, I would like to speak of St. Clare's relationship with Mary.

It was a relationship which was born, developed and reached fullness in the light of the spiritual experience of Francis, in whose heart there reigned two loves: one for Jesus and the other for Mary. Two loves which led both Francis and Clare to imitating Mary and then to identifying with her.

The exclusive love for Jesus, poor and crucified, led Francis, by living the Gospel to the letter, to conforming himself so perfectly to Jesus as to be acknowledged as "*alter Christus*"¹. Thomas of Celano, the one who tells his story, recounts the vision of a friar at the moment of Francis' death. He says: "Indeed, it seemed to the brother and all that great multitude that Christ and Blessed Francis were one and the same person."²

And it was this exclusive love that brought Francis to loving Mary, the Mother of Jesus, with a special love: Again, Celano says: "Toward the Mother of Jesus he was filled with an inexpressible love, because it was she who made the Lord of Majesty our brother."³

The new life of St. Clare, from her conversion to her entrance in heaven, was marked by a special, very special presence of Mary: by Clare's love for Mary and by Mary's love for Clare.

Mary is present at the moment of her consecration to God. It is written: "Leaving her home, city and relatives," we read in the process of canonization, "she hurried towards St. Mary of Portiuncula... the church of the Virgin Mary"⁴. "This is that place – narrates the author of St. Clare's life – in which the new legion of the poor under the leadership of Francis took its happy beginnings, that it might be clearly evident that it was the Mother of Mercies to give birth to both Orders in her own home."⁵

St. Clare's love for Mary began with little thoughtful acts of love. Because it was possible to receive Communion only seven times a year, she wanted her Sisters to do so always on the feast of "the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin"⁶ and she even suspended fasting on the feast days dedicated to Mary.

Clare was in love with Jesus crucified, but also with the Sorrowful Mother. She wrote in a letter: "Meditate untiringly on the mystery of the cross and on the sorrows of the mother at the foot of the cross."⁷

Her growing love for Mary urged St. Clare to find the way to imitate her above all in certain virtues: virginity, purity, poverty and humility. With regard to virginity, St. Clare wrote to Agnes: "So, just as the glorious Virgin of virgins carried Christ physically in her womb, so, you too, following in her

¹. Bonaventura, I, XIV, 4:1240. Ubert. Da Casale, 2093.

². Thomas of Celano, *St. Francis of Assisi*, Franciscan Herald Press, Illinois, 1963., CLXV:219.

³. *Ibid.*, chap. CL:198.

⁴. Processo, XII, 4:3088.

⁵. Vita, 8:3171; also quoted in *Clare: Her Light and Her Song*, Karen Karper, PCPA, Herald Press, Chicago, p. 79-80.

⁶. Rule, III.

⁷. *V lettera*, 2915.

footsteps... can without any doubt, always carry him spiritually in your chaste and virginal body, containing him by whom both you and all things are contained....”⁸

With regard to poverty, she wrote in the Rule, for example: “For love of the most holy and beloved Child who was wrapped in such poor little swaddling clothes and laid in a manger and of his most holy Mother, I admonish, beg and exhort my sisters always to wear poor garments.”⁹ It was her vocation.

With regard to humility, it is stated in the process of canonization that “she was the most humble of all the sisters. ... So great was her humility that she put the other sisters before herself, she put herself below everyone and served them all.”¹⁰

Then, only because forced by St. Francis, she assumed the direction of the monastery and became Abbess.

In the bull of canonization we read: “With all her heart she had married God.”¹¹

Clare experienced the sweetness of life with her heavenly Spouse, while her bothers and sisters saw its effects. We read in the book on her life: “When Clare returned with joy from holy prayer, she brought with her burning words from the fire of the altar of the Lord, which enkindled the hearts of the sisters. They marvelled... that such sweetness came from her lips while her face shone more radiantly than usual.”¹²

The effect was that her sisters and brothers saw in St. Clare, “the image of the Mother of God”, indeed, they saw her as “another Mary”.¹³

After his birth in heaven, Francis was referred to as “*alter Christus*”; similarly, after St. Clare’s process of canonization, people began to speak of her as “another Mary”.

And she was often sung to through the centuries as “*altera Maria*”, along with Francis “*alter Christus*”, in the beautiful Laud of the sixteenth century:

“The Most High God, wishing in his supreme goodness
to renew the presence of his son in our day
sent Francis, and instead of his Mother,
he sent Clare, a blessed virgin.
You renewed the presence, oh Clare, of the Virgin Mary,
Mother of Jesus Christ almighty”.¹⁴

St. Clare had such extraordinary love for Mary that she merited, while still on earth, a special response of love on the part of Mary.

Mary’s embrace, a few moments before dying, was the final manifestation of her love for Clare of Assisi, testified by a nun, Sister Benvenuta in the process of canonization. She writes:

“The Lord placed his hand on another (she writes in third person but she refers to herself, the sister) as well who with her bodily eyes, in tears, saw a beatifying vision. Pierced in truth by the dart of a profound suffering, (because Clare was dying) she turns her gaze towards the door of the house: she sees with her bodily eyes a great multitude of white robed virgins with crowns on their heads who come entering by the door into the room where Clare is laying. Among these virgins there is one unspeakably greater than the others, and beyond all words more beautiful. And from her crown comes such splendour

⁸.III *Lettera*: 2893.

⁹.Rule II.

¹⁰.*Processo* VI, 7:3030. Cf. *Vita*, 12:3181.

¹¹.Cf. *Processo* XII, 4:3088.

¹².*Vita*, 20:3199; also quoted in *Clare: Her Light and Her Song*, Karen Karper, PCPA, Herald Press, Chicago, p. 286.

¹³.Ch. 1L.19,24; FF 2865.

¹⁴.FF 3153, nota 4.

that it illumines the whole house. ... This virgin draws near to the bed of the spouse of her Son and bending over her with the most tender love, she gives her a very sweet embrace.”¹⁵

Before dying on the night between the 8th and 9th of August 1253, Clare speaks to her own soul: “Go in peace for you will be well escorted, for he who created you has provided for your sanctification. He has ever guarded you as a mother does her little child, he has loved you tenderly.” “Blessed be the Lord,” she added, “who created me.” Then, turning to a sister, she asked: “Can you see the King of glory whom I see?”¹⁶

This is something of the relationship between St. Clare and Mary and Mary and St. Clare.

What ideas, what comparisons, what proposals rush to our minds, illuminated by the charism of unity, in view of St. Clare’s rapport with Mary and the rapport we should, indeed, we must have as members of the Work of Mary, which is Mary that continues?

Following the text just read and from the beginning, where it speaks of St. Mary of Portiuncula, the church in which both of the Franciscan orders began, we cannot help but think of Loreto, where we foresaw a white legion of women and men virgins.

And just as Portiuncula already manifests Mary’s predilection for St. Clare and St. Francis and their followers, we can, we must see Loreto as the place of Mary’s first loving glance over us. It was in 1939, five years before that lament of mine at the thought of no longer being able to say the *Hail Mary*, in 1944.

St. Clare began her life with small thoughtful acts of love for Mary.

And us? We know that it was like that for us too.

Even though it might not have seemed so, Mary was never absent on the wide horizons our spirituality opened to us. I remember the time in which the Holy Spirit impressed on our minds and hearts the main points of the new spirituality, which was like Mary nourishing us.

And we are keenly aware of her frequent, splendid and sublime presence during that special period of light in 1949 and 1950. And then all through the years building up the Movement which is a presence and continuation of Mary as a whole and in each individual member.

Mary urged St. Clare to strive for perfection by imitating especially certain virtues: virginity, poverty and humility.

Which virtues did Mary inspire us to live?

All of them. All the virtues that we discovered in her, Mary Desolate. Beginning in the sixties she appeared to us as “a masterpiece of all the virtues.” Thus we could find in her “the stamp or mould” into which we could cast ourselves in order to come out another Christ, another Mary.

How? By imitating her in knowing how to lose everything, in order to have God alone in his will of the present moment. ...

Chiara Lubich

¹⁵.Cf. LCh, 46:3253; also quoted in *Clare: Her Light and Her Song*, Karen Karper, PCPA, Herald Press, Chicago, p. 387.

¹⁶.Lg. 3252; also quoted in *Clare: Her Light and Her Song*, p. 386.