

# Celebrating Women Witnesses

## A Project to Rediscover Women Leaders in the Catholic Church

Clare Offreduccio (1193 - 1253) was born into a wealthy aristocratic family in Assisi. An attractive noblewoman she was expected to improve the fortune of her family by marrying into one of even greater influence. Clare instead "gave the world a bill of divorce." At age 18 she set forth on a radical path that most women of her position dared not choose.

Of necessity Clare's story is linked with that of Francis of Assisi whose itinerant life of poverty was challenging Church and societal reliance on wealth and political power rather than on God. Francis' lifestyle of radical dependence on God was spreading like wildfire in a Church hungry for spiritual renewal. His path of utter reliance on the Gospel was not open to women due to the Medieval expectation that a woman's public consecration to God required enclosure in convents securely endowed by dowries and the patronage of the wealthy. However the radical Gospel grace given flesh by Francis summoned and challenged women as well. Foremost among them was Clare.

Although a teenager from a social class of privilege and power Clare was already imbued with the fervor and practices of the renewal movement of the times known as the penitential life. These practices were most likely modeled by her mother Ortolana and other women of the household. This point is significant. Clare's faith was formed in a feminine network of support. Unlike Francis, her conversion was not a move into moral rectitude from dissipation. It was instead a radical leap of faith into all the possibilities to which the Gospel invited her as a woman who was already living a life of prayer, virtue

and almsgiving. What more was there? She heard it from Francis: "Sell what you have. Give to the poor. Come and follow the One who gives all to you." The unconditional Love alive in Christ claimed her. Discovering what it would mean to center her life on it became her passion, her vocation and her mission.

## CLARE OF ASSISI

### Summoned by the Gospel



Eileen Cantin Verbus

### Church and Society in Clare's World

In the Italy of Clare's day times were changing. The rise of the merchant class and the growing use of money rather than the barter system were challenging feudal conventions. However even though city-states such as Assisi were becoming autonomous, society was still sharply divided between the "majores" and the "minores." The "majores" comprised about 10% of the population and governed in the patriarchal, hierarchical and imperial style typical of the times. The remaining 90% the "minores" tilled the land and depended on the patronage of lords and ladies for sustenance. Women were valued for their marriageability, property and ability to procreate. For the prosperous it was a culture of troubadours, courtly love, knights and ladies. For the indentured it was a life of labor, dependence and low expectations.

In Medieval thought, the social order reflected the divine order. Access to the treasures of faith was easiest for the nobility who had their own chaplains, lived close to the cathedral churches, and had means for pilgrimages and education in monastic schools. The monasteries provided a stable center for a religious culture of catechesis, education, arts and crafts. Piety was largely monastic and liturgical though this was increasingly counter-balanced by the rise of the penitential movements. These sprang from prophetic cries among the common people for spiritual renewal.

Scripture was the basis of most education and was learned by rote. Religious formation depended on preaching and one can presume that the poor did have the Gospels reach them. A fervent religious spirit might express itself in pilgrimages, devotion to Mary, fasting, almsgiving, prayer and hospice care for lepers, who were the most marginalized. Men with religious vocations could enter any one of the approved orders. Women whether by inspiration or resignation, could only enter a religious life of strict enclosure and were dependent on the dowry that they brought. This led to the same divisions between rich and poor in convent life as in society. No other form of consecrated life was possible for women except for the Beguines who were suspect for their attempt to combine community life with lay piety.

The institutional Church was in dire need of reform. In 1215 Pope Innocent IV called the Lateran Council to suppress heresies and to invite renewed fidelity to the Spirit of God. He also forbade institution of any new religious orders.

### **Breaking With Conventions**

It was in such a world that the young noblewoman Clare discreetly followed an inner call to live her faith generously. Eyewitness testimonies from her canonization describe her as a girl beautiful in appearance, behavior and radiance of soul. At sixteen she heard heretofore-unimagined possibilities in Francis' preaching on God's bountiful goodness for ALL. What if she could also cast herself on God's providence as Francis and his companions were doing? What if love for God in and through Christ could shape her entire life?

Gradually she developed a plan for disposing of her dowry, a sure way of becoming less marriageable. This would inevitably thwart the plans of her uncle and brothers to advance the family fortune by using her as a bargaining chip. Clare aspired to a different kind of wealth. On the evening of Palm Sunday 1212 she left home and joined Francis for a simple service in which she exchanged her brocaded gown for a robe of sacking tied at the waist with cord. Since the friars had no accommodations for women she lived at first with nearby Benedictine nuns to learn the basics of vowed life and prayer. Needless to say the men in Clare's family were outraged. For a well-born woman to join Francis' maverick ensemble was scandalous. That Francis was not even a priest but only a deacon and a merchant's son to boot only made matters worse. Clare's uncle and brothers stormed the Benedictine convent to take her home.

They would not desist until she "showed them her head all shaven and affirmed that never would she depart from the service of God." Had they persisted they would incur excommunication for violating sanctuary.

### **Fashioning an Inclusive Community**

Clare moved to the home of the Beguines to learn more of community life. She was joined by her sister Agnes, again incurring the wrath of knightly relatives. In the meantime, Francis and the friars worked feverishly to prepare living quarters attached to the church of San Damiano. There, outside the city wall, accessible to beggars, mercenaries, and lepers as well as townsfolk, this band of women soon grew to fifty. Peasant girls and noblewomen became sisters in their daring faith enterprise. Gathered with Clare around the Gospel passages given them by Francis for guidance, the women fashioned a new way of religious life.

At the center of their lifestyle was an absolute trust in God's provident care first revealed by Jesus. Contemplation of the Christ mystery was the keystone of their lives and they rooted themselves in poverty that mirrored for them the self-giving love of the Triune God. The sisters embraced prayer as life's very breath, seeing such attention to the Spirit within as the highest obedience. They worked in solidarity with the poor and ministered to the ailing, destitute and desperate because it was "washing the feet of the Poor Christ." Despite their diverse social backgrounds they accepted relationship with each other as the testing ground of charity and dwelling place of the Spirit. The growing number of sisters led to an increased need for clear-sighted leadership. At the age of 22 Clare reluctantly assumed responsibility as Abbess. Hers was to become a servant-leadership. Canonization testimony speaks of her wise flexibility, consensual decision-making, discerning guidance, unselfish sharing of all burdens even the most odious, and tender sisterly care.

### **Resisting Patriarchal Values**

For forty-two years Clare and her sisters trusted their own religious experience and successfully withstood pressures of Church authorities to follow the monastic rule of the Benedictines. Oversolicitous clerical superiors sought to incorporate security-assuring monastic elements such as property holdings, authority structured around primacy of the Abbess and an expression of enclosure which shielded from life's harsh realities.

Using today's standards it would be easy to overlook how radical was the lifestyle of Clare and her sisters.

**What you hold, may you always hold,  
What you do, may you always do and  
never abandon.  
But with swift pace, light step,  
unswerving feet,  
so that even your steps stir up no dust,  
may you go forward  
securely, joyfully, swiftly,  
on the path of prudent happiness,  
not believing anything  
not agreeing with anything  
that would dissuade you from this resolution  
or that would place a stumbling block for you on the way,  
so that you may offer your vows to the Most High  
in the pursuit of that perfection  
to which the Spirit of the Lord  
has called you.**

**Words of Encouragement from Clare  
Second letter to Agnes of Prague**

For the first time women dared to pursue a religious vocation without the security of a dowry. For the first time a woman proposed, sought and eventually received papal/ecclesial approval of a "form of life," a rule and this at a time when no new communities were allowed. Never before had women sought "the privilege of living without privilege."

**Partnership with Francis**

Clare shared with Francis a mutual grace of re-birthing the Gospel in their times. Recent research has revealed her as more than a disciple, spiritual friend and feminine expression of Francis' vision. She is also an interdependent sharer in their special charism of evangelical renewal, the "rebuilding of God's Church."

Francis offered initial direction and support of Clare's fledgling community, directing his friars to be assisting but not dominating. However Francis and his brothers then withdrew allowing Clare's unique and powerful charism to unfold. She resolutely clung to the faith of having no security but God and what Love might pro-

vide through trust, abandonment and committed relationships. For her this was the following in the footsteps of Jesus. This was the "privilege of poverty." Francis himself believed that Clare's blending of poverty and contemplation more perfectly approached the ideal of radical Gospel living than he had been able to achieve.

Clare out-lived Francis by twenty-seven years. Her originality, leadership and vocational integrity are attested by the way Francis' friars sought her guidance in critical times. Research shows that Francis himself turned to Clare for assistance in discerning his dilemma whether to follow a more solitary life of prayer or the active ministry of preaching. While Clare regarded Francis as both father and brother-companion it is clear that theirs was a relationship of mutual interdependence that recognized, celebrated and benefited from their diverse giftedness and their deep groundedness in the love of Christ.

## Clare of Assisi References:



Eileen Cantin Verbus

**The feast day for Clare of Assisi is celebrated on August 11. Please use the enclosed prayer service in your parish or small faith community on that day or at another appropriate time.**

In 2001, FutureChurch developed the original **Celebrating Women Witnesses** projects in creative partnership with Call To Action. Since that time hundreds of educational and prayer programs have been held in schools and churches throughout the U.S., Canada, Europe, Latin America, Malaysia and Africa. Currently FutureChurch is solely responsible for administering this very popular project. A specially designed **Teacher's Edition** is also available from FutureChurch which includes lesson plans and special projects geared to junior and senior high school students.

Send for our other organizing packets- **More! Celebrating Women Witnesses, Spanish *Celebrando Mujeres Testigas*, Women In Church Leadership, Future of Priestly Ministry, and Save Our Parish Communities** (\$10 donation each + \$2s/h)- or order online at [www.futurechurch.org](http://www.futurechurch.org).

FutureChurch  
17307 Madison Ave.  
Lakewood, Ohio 44107  
216-228-0869  
[info@futurechurch.org](mailto:info@futurechurch.org)  
[www.futurechurch.org](http://www.futurechurch.org)

Copyright for **Celebrating Women Witnesses** is held by FutureChurch. Permission granted to photocopy upon receipt of emailed or written request. Reprints available: \$1 each, \$15 for 25, \$25 for 50, and \$40 for 100.

## Prayer Service Honoring Clare of Assisi

*A Light For the Gospel Way*

*This prayer service could be used as a Morning or Vespers Prayer or as a setting for an Evening's program with material from the brochure on Clare as a resource for a presentation. Use of the San Damiano Cross icon would be fitting because Clare prayed before this image.*

### Greetings

**Introduction:** Chiara (Clare) Offreduccio di Favarone made a leap of faith which broke new ground for women of all time. The whole Church has been illuminated by the light that radiated from her life. She is unique, yet, came from and inspired a Company of Women: those who nurtured her faith, those who confirmed it by joining her and those who have been inspired to catch some of that radiance and follow her. Remembering Clare's life can generate life in us. As we look to Clare let us search for All that we have in common with her: our faith in Christ, our commitment to the Gospel, our concerns for peace and justice, our love of the poor and our reverence for the earth. Then we can truly call her "sister," and reach out to each other as sisters and brothers.

**Call To Prayer:** As we begin our prayer, let us pause and ask ourselves; How is the Spirit stirring in my heart at this time in my life? *(Pause for Reflection)*

**Presider:** Let us begin our celebration together by worshiping God, our Mother and Father, the Ground of our being, the Source of our life, the Spirit who sets us free (or): In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

**All:** We gather in union with all women who have sung praises to God before we were born and in union with all of those who praise God today, to remember Clare and to hear the Spirit of God in our midst.

**Presider:** Let us pray. Faithful and loving God, your daughter Clare, a woman of noble birth, embraced a life of total poverty, humble service and inclusive love. By her trust in your provident care and the wisdom she learned from the Mystery of Christ, You renewed the Church of her times. Lead us by Your holy Spirit to that same renewing vision. We ask this in the name of Jesus, our Way, our Truth and our Life. Amen.

**Gathering Song:** "*We Are Called*" (David Haas, GIA Publications, Inc.) or "*All Are Welcome*" (Marty Haugen, GIA Publications, Inc.) or Choice of the Community

### Liturgy Of The Word

**Presider:** Come, let us praise Christ whom Clare loved with all her heart.

**Canticle:** Ephesians 1:3-10

**Group 1:** Praised be the God of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens.

**Group 1:** For God has made known to us in all wisdom and insight, the mystery of the plan set forth in Christ.

**Group 1:** We have been predestined to be God's children through Jesus Christ, such was the fullness of time, to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.

**Group 2:** In Christ and through His blood, we have redemption, the forgiveness of our sins, according to the riches of God's grace lavished upon us.

**Group 2:** God chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless in God's sight.

**Group 2:** A plan to be carried out in Christ, in the purpose of God's will, that all might praise the glorious favor bestowed on us in Christ.

**All:** Come, let us praise Christ whom Clare loved with all her heart.

**Reader:** A reading from the second letter of Paul to the Corinthians. (2Cor.4:6-10;16-18)

**Response:** Thanks be to God.

**Presider:** Clare cast all her care upon God whom she called Our Dear Benefactor.

**All:** She hoped in God and God came to her assistance.

**Presider:** Clare spurned the world's wealth to gain Christ.

**All:** She hoped in God and God came to her assistance.

**Gospel:** John 15:9-17 or Matthew 5:13-16 (*Either*)

**Reflection:** *Insights can be drawn from the brochure on Clare of Assisi, in the light of the Scriptures.*

### **Prayers of the Faithful**

**Presider:** The contemplative life reaches out to the whole world. As we pray, may Clare's words guide us: "Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance, and transform your entire being into the image of the Godhead through contemplation ... so that you may taste the hidden sweetness reserved from the beginning for those who love ..." (Early Documents, p. 44)

**Group 1:** Clare ran from home and security to live in Gospel freedom and radical trust.

**Group 2:** Provident God, protect and guide those who flee situations which are a danger to body and spirit.

**Group 1:** Clare's love for Christ impelled her to follow His footsteps boldly and to create a new religious life style for women.

**Group 2:** Spirit of God, help us to trust our experience of You and so to bring this light into All corners of our Church and world.

**Group 1:** Clare was inspired and empowered by Francis to live the Gospel and became a creative co-worker, prophetic leader and spiritual friend interdependently with him.

**Group 2:** Free us, O God, evermore, to recognize Your gifts in one another, to release them and to work in partnership for the spread of Your Kingdom.

**Group 1:** Clare lived in a society shaped by violence, domination, and exclusion. In the compassionate Christ she found that we are All God's beloved children.

**Group 2:** O God, we are all precious in your sight. Disarm hearts barricaded by bigotry and fear of those who are different.

**Group 1:** Having learned all things at the feet of the poor and humble Christ, Clare wrote letters of profound spiritual guidance to Agnes of Prague and other women founders.

**Group 2:** Continue to pour out on your Church, O God, the gifts of faith-sharing, spiritual direction, inspired preaching and sound teaching.

**Group 1:** For forty-two years Clare resisted attempts by over solicitous Church leaders to dissuade her and "the Poor Ladies" from following Christ in "the privilege of living without privilege!"

**Group 2:** Loving God, we entrust to Your compassion those whose service of the Gospel has resulted in disapproval by Church authorities. Enlighten the hearts and minds of all concerned for the greater good of Your People.

**Group 1:** The crucified but risen Christ became for Clare the mirror in which she beheld the mysteries of God's outpouring Love until she too mirrored that Love.

**Group 2:** Teach us, O Holy Spirit, to "Gaze, Consider, Contemplate" Your Love incarnate so that we may imitate Christ as Clare did.

- Group 1:** Clare became the first woman to compose a Rule of Life approved by the Church and opened a path to holiness for women followed to this very day.
- Group 2:** Holy God, bless abundantly those embracing the life of poverty, prayer and sacrificial love in Poor Clare monasteries throughout the world. May You be the delight of their hearts as we are blessed by their vocation.

### **Rite of Healing**

*(Soft instrumental music may begin at this point)*

**Presider:** Without ever seeking it, Clare experienced the gift of healing prayer. It was expressed without words. Canonization testimonies described how needy people were healed as Clare made a sign of the cross over the afflicted area. This healing power flowed from Clare's compassionate love for the Crucified but Risen Jesus. Celano writes: "*The Beloved repaid His love for her love with outward miraculous signs*, for when she signed the sick and infirm with the cross, their illness vanished." (*Praying With Clare of Assisi*, Miller and Peterson, p. 66) Clare witnessed to the resurrecting power of love. As a closing ritual let us open ourselves to the healing and reconciling power of the Cross which overturns disease, death and evil. (*This ritual of blessing will be carried out in pairs, so I ask you to become aware of who your partner might be.*)

- 1) Now let us all take a moment of silence to become aware of a burden we bear. It may be physical, emotional, or spiritual. It may be personal, for another or for the Church or world. After the need becomes clear, silently lift up your need, trusting in God's healing love. (*Presider allows time for this.*)
- 2) Now turn to your partner. Perhaps the person on my right could be the first to extend blessing. If your partners wish to make their needs known briefly, they may do so. Then lay hands in a silent healing prayer and close it with a sign of the cross on the forehead.
- 3) Reverse roles and conclude with an embrace of peace. We will then continue to stand in prayer for each other until all are blessed.

### **Blessing and Dismissal**

**Presider:** Dear friends, we have been refreshed by the presence and witness of our Sister Clare's life and the power of God's grace in her to renew the Church and society. In closing let us receive as blessing her encouraging words to hold true to the call of God in our hearts.

*(Presider and other prayer leaders extend hands on the assembly.)*

"What you hold, may you always hold -- what you do may you always do and never abandon. But with swift pace, light step, unswerving feet, so that even your steps stir up no dust, may you go forward securely, joyfully, swiftly, on the path of prudent happiness, not believe anything, not agreeing with anything that would dissuade you from this resolution or that would place a stumbling block for you on the way, so that you may offer your vows to the Most High in pursuit of that perfection to which the Spirit of the Lord has called you." (*Praying With Clare of Assisi*, Miller and Peterson pg. 101)

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

Closing Song: *Christ, Be Our Light* (Bernadette Farrell, OCP Publications)

This prayer service was prepared by Sister Francis Therese Woznicki, SSJ-TOSF, Co-Director,  
The Franciscan Center, Garfield Hts., OH

**Celebrating Women Witnesses** developed by FutureChurch  
[www.futurechurch.org](http://www.futurechurch.org) - 216-228-0869 - info@futurechurch.org

Permission granted to photocopy upon receipt or emailed or written request to FutureChurch



### *Clare of Assisi: Summoned by the Gospel*

1. What is Clare's given name and when did she live?
2. How old was Clare when she decided to leave home and join Francis' group?
3. Why were the men in Clare's family so outraged by her decision to leave home? What kind of proof did they demand before they would allow her to stay in the convent?
4. Look up the meaning of the following words and phrases in the article and tell how they are significant in the life of Clare of Assisi.

Aristocratic:

Indentured:

Dowry:

Marginalized:

5. Describe the class system of the time and how it affected Clare.

6. Describe the lifestyle of Clare and her community of sisters:

What was the keystone of their lives?

What was their attitude about poverty?

How did they view prayer?

Who did they serve?

How did they treat each other?

7. Describe Clare's leadership style as Abbess of her community.

8. Name 3 “firsts” that Clare and her sisters achieved in the history of women’s religious orders.

- a.
- b.
- c.

9. Describe Clare’s relationship with Francis of Assisi and his followers.

10. What was the theme of “Words of Encouragement from Clare” in her “Second Letter to Agnes of Prague”?

11. Clare of Assisi was a woman summoned by the Gospel. What does the story of her life have to say to Catholics summoned by the same Gospel today?

11. Clare made a radical choice when she gave up her wealthy lifestyle to live a life of simplicity as a religious sister. Write an imaginary dialogue between a talk show host and a famous celebrity who has decided to enter a religious order today. Think of at least 5 questions and answers.



*This worksheet was prepared by Janet Claussen as a part of FutureChurch’s **Celebrating Women Witnesses Teacher’s Edition**. To order the complete edition with 12 essays, prayer services and worksheets, go to [www.futurechurch.org](http://www.futurechurch.org) or call 216-228-0869 X5.*