

«THE LORD GAVE US OUR MOST BLESSED FATHER FRANCIS AS A FOUNDER»

SAINT CLARE FOUNDRESS?

Noel Muscat OFM

During the year in which we celebrated the 750th anniversary of the approval of the Rule of Saint Clare by Pope Innocent IV (9 August 1253) and of the death of Saint Clare (11 August 1253), we had the occasion to go deeper into the study of Saint Clare and her specific charism, particularly regarding her relationship with Saint Francis.

In the present state of research, everybody agrees that Clare presents much more than simply a feminine facet to the personality and charism of Francis. It is, however, important, that we let Clare herself speak about the specific relationship which she had with Saint Francis, and about how she considered herself in his regard. We could then also see very briefly what the medieval biographies of Saint Francis say regards the relationship between Clare and Francis.

This brief analysis of the language used by Clare and that used by the biographers can help us to clear some of our ideas regarding the relationship between Clare and her Sisters, with regards to Saint Francis and the Friars Minor. We will try to do this with the hope that one can have the possibility to use a correct and adequate terminology when speaking about Saint Clare, and presenting this exceptional woman in a professional manner.¹

Clare speaks about her relationship with Francis in her Writings

The portrait of Clare in her relationship with Saint Francis appears clear in her writings. The merit of Clare lies specifically in the fact that she understood her specific vocation within the family founded by Francis of Assisi. In her Testament Clare regards her vocation as the greatest among the gifts that she and the Poor Sisters of San Damiano received from the Father of mercies.

In the Rule of Saint Clare I,3, the saint writes: «Clare, the unworthy servant of Christ and the little plant of the most blessed Francis, promises obedience and reverence to the Lord Pope Innocent and his canonically elected successors, and to the Roman Church».²

¹ ALFONSO MARINI, «Ancilla Christi, plantula sancti Francisci. Gli scritti di Santa Chiara e la Regola», *Chiara di Assisi*. Atti del XX Convegno Internazionale della Società Internazionale di Studi Francescani (Assisi, 15-17 ottobre 1992), Spoleto 1993, 107-156; MARCO BARTOLI, «Novitas clariana. Chiara, testimone di Francesco», *op. cit.*, 157-185.

² RegCI I,3: «Clara indigna ancilla Christi et plantula beatissimi patris Francisci promittit obedientiam et reverentiam domino papae Innocentio et successoribus eius canonice intrantibus, et Ecclesiae Romanae». [Fontes Franciscani, a cura di E. Menestò e S. Brufani, Edizioni Porziuncola, Assisi 1995]. English translations of the Writings of Saint Clare are taken from *Clare of Assisi. Early Documents*, Revised and Expanded by R.J. Armstrong, The Franciscan Institute Publications, Saint Bonaventure University, NY, 1993.

In the Testament of Saint Clare, 37-39, the saint writes: «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, consider together with my sisters so lofty a profession and the command of such a father and also the frailty of some others that we feared in ourselves after the passing of our holy father Francis, who was our pillar of strength and, after God, our one consolation and support...».³

In the same Testament 48-51, Clare expresses her last will to the Sisters regarding the relationship which she considered to be proper between them and the Friars Minor, built upon the same model of relationship which existed between herself and Saint Francis: «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 things 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 most perfectly most holy poverty».⁴

It is interesting that, in this section, Clare explicitly mentions Saint Francis as the «fundatorem, plantatorem et adiutorem», three adjectives which show the role of Francis as the one who alone is the founder of the Order of the Poor Ladies of San Damiano (founder), as the one who takes care of the formation of his little plant (planter), and as the one who promises continual support personally and by the brothers as a guarantee of unity in the same project of evangelical life (helper). The history of the Second Order shows that the Friars Minor were not always aware and faithful to their specific duty, which was left to them as a legacy by Francis, either because they neglected the spiritual care of the Poor Clares, or because they interfered in situations where they should have left the sisters alone.

In her Blessing to the Sisters, 6, Clare writes: «I, Clare, a servant of Christ, a little plant of our most holy Father Francis, a sister and mother of you and the other poor sisters».⁵

Clare was conscious that the relationship which she and the Poor Ladies were to establish with the Friars Minor was a result of the same experience of life which she had lived with Francis in sharing the same Gospel calling, so much so that she does not see any difference between her sense of faithfulness to Saint Francis, and the faithfulness and obedience she wanted to show towards the Minister General Brother Elias (1232-1239), who cannot certainly be considered on the same level of sanctity as Saint Francis. When writing to Sister Agnes of Prague, in her Second Letter to her, she insists: «In all of this, follow the counsel of our venerable father, our Brother Elias, the Minister General, that you may walk more securely in the way of the

³ TestCl 37-39: «Considerans igitur ego Clara, Christi et sororum pauperum monasterii Sancti Damiani ancilla, licet indigna, et plantula sancti patris cum aliis meis sororibus tam altissimam professionem nostram et tanti patris mandatum, fragilitatem quoque aliarum quam timebamus in nobis post obitum sancti patris nostri Francisci, qui erat columna nostra et unica consolatio nostra post Deum...».

⁴ TestCl 48-51: «Et sicut Dominus dedit nobis beatissimum patrem nostrum Franciscum in fundatorem, plantatorem et adiutorem nostrum in servitio Christi et in his quae Domino et beato patri nostro promissimus, qui etiam dum vixit sollicitus fuit verbo et opera semper excolere et fovere nos plantulam suam; sic recomendo et relinquo sorores meas, quae sunt et quae venturae sunt, successori beatissimi patris nostril Francisci et toti religioni, ut sint nobis in adiutorium proficiendi semper in melius ad serviendum Deo et observandam praecipue melius sanctissimam paupertatem».

⁵ BenCl 6: «Ego Clara, ancilla Christi, plantula beatissimi patris nostri sancti Francisci, soror et mater vestra et aliarum sororum pauperum.»

commands of the Lord. Prize is beyond the advice of the others and cherish it as dearer to you than any gift».⁶

A rapid look at the adjectives which Clare uses to explain who she was and what was her relationship with Saint Francis helps us to clear our ideas. Clare considers herself to be a servant of Christ, a little plant of Saint Francis, a sister and a mother of the Poor Ladies. In a very clear way she shows that she recognizes Christ as the only Lord, that she sees Saint Francis as the one who planted in her the form of life of the Gospel, and that she considers the Poor Ladies as her sisters and daughters, since she was the first one among them who followed the life of Gospel perfection. Christ is the Lord of Clare and the Poor Sisters, Francis is the founder, and the Sisters are daughters.

In an insistent way which becomes nearly tedious, Clare calls Saint Francis «beatissimus pater Franciscus». There is no doubt that the founder and father of the Order of Poor Ladies of San Damiano is Saint Francis. If Clare admits that there exists a maternal relationship, this is certainly only present in the case of Clare and the Poor Ladies, who can look upon her as their mother in a spiritual sense, but certainly, not in the juridical sense of a foundress.

The identity and the reciprocal relationship between Clare and Francis in the Sources for the Life of Saint Francis

We shall now take a rapid glance at some texts from the Sources for the Life of Saint Francis. We shall begin with a fundamental text taken from the Major Legend of Saint Francis IV,6: «Virgins, too, were drawn to perpetual celibacy, among whom was the virgin especially dear to God, Clare. As the first tender sprout, she gave forth a fragrance like a lustrous untouched flower that blossoms in springtime, and she shone like a brilliant star. Now she is glorified in heaven and fittingly venerated by the Church on earth, she who was the daughter in Christ of our holy father Francis, the little poor man, and the mother of the Poor Ladies».⁷

There is no need to have a more clear explanation from the one which Saint Bonaventure gives in this text, in order to understand the relationship which Clare had with Christ, with Francis and with the Poor Ladies.

Both Thomas of Celano and Julian of Speyer use similar expressions. Celano, in his Life of Saint Francis, 116, in the scene where Clare and the Sisters see the dead body of Francis for the last time, writes: «The Lady Clare! Clearly a woman of true brilliance and holiness, the first mother of all the others, the first plant of that holy Order: she comes with her daughters to see the father who would never again speak to

⁶ EpAgn II,15-16: «In hoc autem, ut mandatorum Domini securius viam perambules, venerabilis patris nostri fratris nostri Heliae, generalis ministri, consilium imitare; quod praeponere consiliis ceterorum et reputa tibi carius omni dono».

⁷ LM VI,6: «Convertebantur etiam virgines ad perpetuum coelibatum, inter quas virgo Deo carissima Clara, ipsarum plantula prima, tamquam flos vernans et candidus odorem dedit et tamquam stella praefulgida radiavit. Haec nunc glorificata in caelis, ab Ecclesia digne veneratur in terris, quae filia fuit in Christo sancti patris Francisci pauperuli et mater Pauperum Dominarum». The English translations of the Sources for the Life of Saint Francis are taken from *Francis of Assisi. Early Documents*, Vol. I, The Saint; Vol. II, The Founder; Vol. III, The Prophet, edited by Regis J. Armstrong, J.A. Wayne Hellmann, William J. Short, New City Press, New York – London - Manila, 1999-2001.

them or return to them, as he was quickly going away».⁸ In his *Life of Saint Francis*, 72, Julian of Speyer expresses himself in similar terms: «Behold their pious mother, the first seedling of that Order, Clare in fact and in name, after she – together with her daughters – was allowed to see the body of the most dear father began to weep pitifully over him.»⁹

There is agreement between the terms which Clare herself uses when speaking about herself and the Poor Ladies in her Writings, and those used in the Sources for the *Life of Saint Francis*. All this shows that, in spite of the fact that there was a close relationship between the monastery of San Damiano and the Porziuncola, between Clare and the Poor Ladies and some of the brothers, like Leo, Rufino, Filippo Longo, all these persons knew exactly the specific characteristics of their Gospel vocation as sisters and brothers. The texts show that there was a profound mutual respect and prudence between them, regarding their different but complementary roles as Poor Ladies and Friars Minor. Above all they were convinced and unanimous in their agreement that Francis was the only person who was the innovator, founder and formator of all of them, and that he was justly to be considered as the holy father of them all.

We now conclude with some observations which touch our mutual relationships today as Poor Clares and Friars Minor. Clare always considered herself as the little plant of Saint Francis and she calls him the holy father of her and of the Sisters. She therefore always sees in Saint Francis the founder of the Poor Ladies, in much the same way as the Church considers him as the founder of the Friars Minor, the Poor Clares and the Brothers and Sisters of Penance (Secular Franciscans). Clare sees herself as the mother and sister of the Poor Ladies. This maternal aspect is certainly present, but on a purely spiritual level, and certainly not on a juridical one. Although the Sources do not say anything explicit regards the way in which Clare used to look at her relationship with the brothers of Saint Francis, there is no doubt that it never crossed her mind that she could in some way be considered as a «co-foundress» (that is, a «mother») of the brothers, together with their father Saint Francis. From an analysis of the Writings of Clare and from the texts of the Sources nowhere do we find that there is any documented proof that Clare is a «foundress» of the Poor Ladies or a «mother» of the Friars Minor.

In the Letter of Giacomo Bini OFM to the Poor Clares on the occasion of the last Clarian centenary, entitled «Clare of Assisi: A Song of Praise», there is a reflection which touches upon the reciprocity of the relationship between the First and Second Order: «We have made good progress in recent years. But there is a long way to go yet. Granted, the Poor Clares do not have a defined juridical link with the first Order as the other big religious families have (Dominicans, Carmelites); it is nevertheless true that we are living the same evangelical adventure in minority, and we would lose so much if we ignored the profound complementarity that binds us. Legitimate autonomy should not be taken as a justification for moving ahead in isolation, completely independent and to all intents and purposes self-sufficient. And

⁸ IC 116: «Et ecce domina Clara, quae vere meritorum sanctitate clara erat, aliarum mater prima, quia prima planta huius sancti ordinis fuit, venit cum reliquis filiabus ad videndum patrem non loquentem eis, nec reversurum ad eas, alibi properantem».

⁹ LJS, 72: «Et ecce pia mater illarum, prima scilicet illius religionis planta, re Clara et nomine, ad videndum corpus dilectissimi patris cum filiabus admissa, coepit miserande nimium plangere super illum».

having a Franciscan carry out the pastoral sacramental services is not a sufficient guarantee of a Franciscan-Clarian spirituality».¹⁰

We find the same ideas expressed in the Letter written by José Rodríguez Carballo OFM, «Clare of Assisi and of Today. A Heart Seduced and Enraptured by the Lord»: «It is necessary that both the Friars and the Sisters ask ourselves: How do we live our charismatic complementarity? How do we Friars respond to the promise made by Francis to spiritually accompany the Sisters? How do the Sisters live all that Clare wanted to express through obedience to Francis and his successors? What consequences, including those of a juridical nature, should we draw from it?».¹¹

It is certain that we cannot change juridical structures, particularly in those local Churches where there is still a centralized form of governance of the female monasteries in the hands of the local Ordinary. But we can show with the facts of our lives that our specific calling calls for a reciprocity which goes beyond moments of common prayer and celebration, while at the same time safeguarding in a respectful way the autonomy of life and the sense of privacy of the Poor Clares in the observance of the values of silence and cloistered life. In spite of all we say and do, we know that a lot depends upon us.

The Poor Clares have every right to spiritually consider Clare as their mother, while at the same time recognizing that the only founder of the Second Order is Saint Francis. There is certainly no documented witness that the Friars Minor ever called Clare their «mother». The celebration of the Clarian centenary should have been of help in order to renew in a professional way our reciprocal relationship between us Friars Minors and our sisters the Poor Clares, according to the intention and will of our founder Saint Francis and his little plant Saint Clare.

¹⁰ GIACOMO BINI OFM, «Clare of Assisi: A Song of Praise». A Letter of the Minister General on the 750 anniversary of the death of St. Clare and the approval of her Rule, Curia Generalis OFM, Rome 2002, Part IV.

¹¹ JOSÉ R. CARBALLO OFM, «Clare of Assisi and of Today. A Heart seduced and enraptured by the Lord», Letter on the occasion of the 750th Anniversary of the death of Saint Clare and of the approval of her Rule, Curia Generalis OFM, Rome, 2004, 6-7.