Our Lady of the Angels

“The Presbytery”

198 Bay Terrace

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My dear brothers and sisters,

On this Feast Day of our holy Mother Saint Clare,

I wish you peace and joy,

The Monthly Spiritual Message (MSM) of August was unique. Let me write honestly about its development. When I wrote the booklet, *Saint Clare Light of the West*, I completely missed the **formation method** of Saint Clare:

**GAZE, CONSIDER, CONTEMPLATE**

*desiring to imitate**Your Spouse.*

It was only later that I became aware of it, and then I was happily surprised, realizing that Saint Clare must have had a good laugh at my foolishness in thinking that I had her all worked out. *Somewhat* *humbled*, since that is a tricky virtue, I began to discuss this contemplative formation method of Saint Clare with many other people. All this happened before I finished writing the August MSM. So, let me admit, I was ignorant of this Franciscan “Pearl of Wisdom.”

Other friars and seculars responded to my questions about this spiritual insight of Saint Clare as if they had learned this secret long ago. I was still catching up. One must smile with the grace of blessed hope to realize that those coming after us are well advanced in spiritual insight. I guess the older we get, we need to trust that the Holy Spirit will not abandon the generations coming after us.

As for me, in my zeal for trying to understand what Saint Clare meant, I complicated the method at first because I saw that all elements were essential, so I had it originally down as:

GAZE, CONSIDER, CONTEMPLATE, DESIRE, IMITATE

However, others argued that desire or desiring and imitate were auxiliary or after GAZE, CONSIDER CONTEMPLATE, and we need to look at the process in a linear (straight line) way.

However, it was finally pointed out to me that the method's paradigm (the pattern) is not linear but reflexive. It is a process, a formation technique, that repeats itself constantly because of the desire to imitate.

We can see this also in the Secular Franciscan method or process of formation: “going from gospel to life and life to the gospel” (Rule 4). It is not just a one-off, linear form, but a way of living the Gospel; of putting it into practice every day. In this sense, it is cyclical; it goes around and around, repeating itself, transforming us by the grace of the Holy Spirit, whose only desire is to remake us into the image of Christ. But more than this, it is a spiritual spiral, a life-giving helix, winding and leading ever higher in its transformational process.

I was happy with this because it agrees with my own saying, *“The Franciscan flies up to heaven on the two wings of Contemplation and Fraternity.”* Fraternity is a commitment to living in fraternity, and it is a witness and a hope for a better future. Fraternity is the driving force toward what the Church sees as a Civilization of Love and Compassion. Pope Francis proposes this in his “*Tutti Fratelli”* (all brothers).

However, there is something exceptional about Saint Clare’s method. She is contemplative; her focus is on her beloved – Christ! Her vision is not, from a primary point of view, on the text of the Gospel or Scripture. I do not even think her sight is on the humiliation of the Incarnation, although she expresses it beautifully. Neither is it on the external sufferings of Christ on the Cross. Saint Clare was in love with and focused on the very person of Christ.

Saint Francis focused on Christ’s terrible sufferings and received the Stigmata. Just as the Pope sealed the Rule of Life of Franciscans, Christ sealed Saint Francis with his wounds so that we would never look at the Rule without looking at the life and person of Saint Francis. Interestingly, the writings of Saint Francis and Saint Clare have been hidden for almost 700 years. Therefore, it is as holy persons, that they have influenced the Church, this much more so, over a long period of time, than by their writings.

Maybe I am wrong; I am so often! But I think Saint Clare focused on the person of Jesus. She stood with the Blessed Mother before the Cross, filled with compassion for Jesus. Centuries later, Our Lord, speaking to Saint Camilla Baptista Verano**[[1]](#footnote-1)** a Poor Clare (1458-1524), said, *“So many think about my external sufferings; none knows of my interior suffering.”*

So, Saint Clare reminds us, by default, that we are not people of “The Book,” of a Scripture text, but people in a relationship with our beloved Lord Jesus Christ. To this end, Saint Clare reminds Saint Agnes that her status is not found in being a Princess or a Queen. Indeed, in her first letter, Clare addresses Agnes out of an extraordinary gospel reference:

*Therefore, most beloved sister,*

*or should I say, Lady worthy of great respect, because,*

*“****you are the spouse, mother, and sister of my Lord Jesus Christ*** *…****”***

*… be strengthened in the holy service of the Poor Crucified.”*

This quote in (bold type) is from Saint Francis’ *Earlier Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance,* which is now, since 1978, the “Prologue” to the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order.

Saint Clare has taken something Saint Francis wrote for the “Secular Franciscans” (the Brothers and Sisters of Penance) and made it why Agnes should be respected! Not because Agnes is a princess and sister to her brother, the King, or because she almost became Empress of the Holy Roman Empire, but because of her relationship with Jesus Christ.**[[2]](#footnote-2)** Clare and Francis understand the high calling, not just of the Friars or the Poor Ladies of San Damiano, but of every baptized Christian.

The letters of Saint Clare are personal letters of spiritual direction, specifically for Agnes of Prague. That Saint Clare was an excellent formator and spiritual director manifests that Agnes of Prague**[[3]](#footnote-3)**is now **Saint** **Agnes of Prague**, even if her canonization took over 700 years.

This letter is a little heavy but comes from my muddling studies about Saint Clare. I have a sense that, finally, I have met Saint Clare, and she is very kind, respectful, and easily amused by the feeble efforts of her beloved friars. I highly recommend her to you in your prayers, as I recommend you to her for her blessing – her blessing was the way she worked so many miracles.

Sincerely,

Fr John Cooper OFM Cap

National Spiritual Assistant OFS - Australia

1. Saint Camilla and her family protected the Capuchins at their very beginning. She was canonized on the 17th of October 2010 by Pope Benedict XVI along with Saint Mary McKillop. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The scripture source given for this quote is Matthew 12:50. But the language is resonant with Saint Francis Letter to the Faithful: “*They are spouses, brothers, and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are spouses when the faithful soul is joined by the Holy Spirit to our Lord Jesus Christ. We are brothers to Him when we do the will of the Father who is in heaven. We are mothers when we carry Him in our heart and body through a divine love and a pure and sincere conscience and give birth to Him through a holy activity which must shine as an example before others. O how glorious it is to have a holy and great Father in heaven! O how holy, consoling to have such a beautiful and wonderful Spouse! O how holy and how loving, gratifying, humbling, peace-giving, sweet, worthy of love, and, above all things, desirable: to have such a Brother and such a Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. St Agnes of Prague has as her ancestor Saint Wenceslaus (that *Good King Wenceslaus, who went out upon the feast of Saint Stephen*). She is also a cousin of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)