***Monthly Spiritual Message***

**August 2023**

**ST CLARE OF ASSISI**

***Formator, Spiritual Director***

Almost 800 years ago,[[1]](#footnote-1) St Clare wrote her first letter[[2]](#footnote-2) to Princess Agnes of Bohemia, who had just joined the convent of the Ladies of San Damiano in Prague, which she had founded.[[3]](#footnote-3) In all, St Clare wrote four letters to St Agnes of Prague. Whatever caused St Clare to write to St Agnes, it has become a great blessing for us because it gives us an insight into Clare’s relationship with Jesus Christ and her method of transformation through contemplation. St Clare, once called the hidden spring of Franciscan Spirituality[[4]](#footnote-4), today with modern research, gives us a spiritual drink from the pure spring of Franciscan mysticism.

In her Second Letter to Agnes of Prague, Lady Clare summarises her method of formation in gospel spirituality. Like all great mystics, her writing here takes on what can only be understood as the grace of the Holy Spirit.[[5]](#footnote-5) She writes:

*“Most noble Queen,*

***gaze****,* ***consider****,* ***contemplate****,*

*desiring to imitate**your Spouse.”*[[6]](#footnote-6)

In a simple set of words, Clare sets out her method of formation: **Gaze, Consider, Contemplate**.[[7]](#footnote-7) For her, this is completed by having the *desire* to *imitate* Christ. This method is not a linear motion, but rather the desire to imitate makes it a cyclic motion to continue repeatedly to gaze, consider, and contemplate. It is a spiral – a spiritual helix, very much like the Secular Franciscan method of formation and its way of life, “going from gospel to life and life to the gospel” (OFS Rule 4).

For Clare, this is the Way.[[8]](#footnote-8) It is the transforming grace of the Holy Spirit that draws us into an ever-deepening relationship with the Son and the Father.The Rule of St Clare clearly says that the life of the Poor Clare is “*to observe the holy gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” However, in her letters, Clare’s attention focuses on the very person of Jesus Christ, her Lord and Saviour - her life.

St Clare’s very personal and intense method of formation is further developed in her Fourth Letter to Agnes of Prague, where Clare uses an image very widespread in the Middle Ages - the mirror. She invited Agnes to reflect for herself in that Mirror of Perfection to discover every virtue – in the Lord himself. She wrote:

***Gaze***[[9]](#footnote-9) *upon that mirror each day,
and continually study your face in it,
that you may adorn yourself completely,
within and without,*

*with the garments of all the virtues.[[10]](#footnote-10)
In that mirror,
blessed poverty, holy humility, and inexpressible charity*

*shine forth
as, with the grace of God,
you will be able to contemplate them*

*throughout the entire mirror.*

***Look***[[11]](#footnote-11) *at the poverty of Him,
who was placed in a manger*

*and wrapped in swaddling clothes.
O marvellous humility!*

*O astonishing poverty!
The King of angels,
the Lord of heaven and earth,*is laid in a manger!

*Then* ***reflect***[[12]](#footnote-12) *upon,*

*the holy humility,*

*the blessed poverty,
the untold labours and punishments
that He endured for the redemption of the whole human race.*

*Finally,* ***contemplate****,[[13]](#footnote-13) in the depth of this same mirror,
the ineffable charity*

*that He chose to suffer on the tree of the cross
and to die there, the most shameful kind of death.*

*May you, therefore,*

*be inflamed ever more strongly with the fire of love!*

*As you further* ***contemplate***

*His ineffable delights, riches and perpetual honours,*

*and, sighing,*

*may you cry out*

 *from the great desire and love of your heart:*[[14]](#footnote-14)

*In your love, may the tongue of the flesh be silent;*

*may the tongue of the Spirit speak.*

NOTE: As presented here, the text of St Clare’s letter has been a great deal reworked to give it a more modern and direct reading. Please see Footnote 13, if you wish to read the original.

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1. The four Letters are dated 1234, 1235, 1238 and then fifteen years later 1253. St Clare had her tele-vision Christmas Mass where she saw everything that was happening during the Mass of the Nativity in the Basilica of St Francis in 1252. She died the following year on the 11th of August 1253. St Clare was canonized two years later in 1255. St Agnes was not canonized until 1989, by Pope St John Paul II. St Agnes was honoured in 2011, the 800th anniversary of her birth, as the Saint who overthrew Communism in her country, with a year dedicated to her in Czechia. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We do not have any letters in reply from St Agnes of Prague to St Clare of Assisi. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. St Clare sent five Sisters of her community from San Damiano to the new convent in Prague. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Evelyn Underhill, (1875 – 1941) “*We know nothing of St. Clare's mystical experience.”* Essentials of Mysticism. Evelyn Underhill did not have access to the Letters of St Clare. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to transform us by deepening our relationship with Christ. Hopefully, that is why we joined a Franciscan Order in the first place. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Latin is: *regina praenobilis, intuere, considerare, contemplare, desiderans imitari.* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In Clare of Assisi: The Lady, p. 49 footnote b: only three words of her method are listed: Gaze, Consider, Contemplate. In her Fourth Letter, St Clare gives a fuller explanation of her method of formation. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *“I am the way, the truth, and the life”* (John 14:6). In her Testament, St Clare tells us: *“The Son of God has become the way that our blessed father Francis, his true lover and imitator, has shown and taught us by word and example.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The Latin word Clare uses is *intuere,* which means gaze [upon] or, as she also says, look [upon]. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The Virtues are seen as the wedding garments of heaven; the contrasting Vices are the garments of hell. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Here, Clare actually uses the Latin word *attendere* translated as “look”. However,today in counselling, “attending” is much more than looking at a person but rather, to be aware of everything about those persons as they are presenting themselves to you. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Clare uses the Latin word *considerare,* translated here as “reflect.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *contemplate* and *desire* and *love* [Him]. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Perhaps, the best translation of the Letters of St Clare is found on the Internet at the following address because it gives the English and the Latin original: [The Fourth Letter to Agnes of Prague: CA:ED, p. 55 (franciscantradition.org)](https://www.franciscantradition.org/clare-of-assisi-early-documents/the-fourth-letter-to-agnes-of-prague/231-ca-ed-1-page-55) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)