***Monthly Spiritual Message***

**December 2024**

**ST CLARE, OUR SERAPHIC MOTHER**

**AND CHRISTMAS**

Recently, I was asked by Sandrea Petith OFS, the fraternity minister from *Saints Anne and Joachim* *Fraternity,* of the Central Coast, New South Wales, – after their recent successful Elections, Congratulations on that! – the following question: “*We can refer to St Francis as our Seraphic Father, so can we refer to Saint Clare as our Seraphic Mother?*” I must admit that I challenged that idea in a letter to her, saying that although I see Saint Clare referred to as *“Our Seraphic Mother*” on the Internet, I do not see such a title being used in ancient texts or prayers. I followed this with the following answer:

“Seraphic” is an adjective describing the highest Order of Angels – the Seraphim,[1] who stand before the face of God. Essentially, it means “*one who is on fire with the love of God*”, and in the Old Testament, they most often appear as a living flame of burning love.[2]  We join in the continuous hymn of these Seraphim before the throne of God in heaven, during the Mass when, at the end of the Preface, we sing:

“Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts.
Heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.”

We are told [3] that Saint Francis received the sacred Stigmata from a Seraphic Angel, one of the Six Winged Seraphim, who appeared to him as the Crucified Lord Jesus Christ while he was on the mountain of La Verna in 1224, two years before his death.[4] Because of that, Saint Francis is called “Seraphic” and is titled “*Our Seraphic Father Francis*!” Also, his Order is called “*The Seraphic Order*” only because he is the founder and because his spirituality focuses on **the primacy of love above all else.**[5]

I continued my rational argument: Saint Clare did not receive the Stigmata, although she continually reflected on the sufferings of her beloved Lord, Jesus Christ. We are told that she constantly prayed the *“Prayer of the Five Wounds”*[6] which it seems neither St Francis nor St Clare composed. [7]  However, I must apologise to Sandrea, the whole OFS Region of New South Wales, and the emerging fraternity of Cairns in Queensland, who have Saint Clare as their patron. I was using the word *“Seraphic”* too narrowly because the Church calls Saint Bonaventure a *Seraphic Doctor,* and Saint Catherine of Siena, another Doctor of the Church, and not even a Franciscan, but a Dominican Tertiary, is also titled “*Serafica Virgine S. Caterina da Siena.*” And I am told the title is also given to “*Our Seraphic Mother Saint Agnes of Assisi*.” It seems *“Seraphic”* is liberally sprinkled, as a title, on any saint on fire with the love of God.

I guess in the wider sense, we could call the Secular Franciscan Order, since it was founded by Saint Francis, not just a part of the Seraphic Order of Saint Francis, but a Seraphic Order. Let me remind you, in case you missed it, that November 29th is the feast *of****“All Saints of the Seraphic Order”****,* and I think this includes all the saints of the Seraphic Secular Franciscan Order! Have I gone too far? Let me go further. I would like to add Saint Angela of Foligno, (Third Order of St Francis/Secular Franciscan Order) titled “Teacher of Theologians” to the Seraphic list. She was canonised by “equivalent canonisation” in 2013, by Pope Francis. Her writings are profound.

When we return to Saint Clare, we are left with a very deep question. Why didn’t Saint Clare receive the Stigmata? Are we missing something about Saint Clare? In no way was she less a founder and mother of the Seraphic Order than St Francis, even if the Stigmata made him, dare I say, unique, as the first stigmatist in the Church’s history and raised him mystically to the Order of the Seraphim.

Yes, you can call Lady Clare *“Our Seraphic Mother Saint Clare.”*However, I think Saint Clare is much more than that. Saint Francis became Christ’s “new” image, by his identification with Christ. Saint Clare became the “new” image of the Blessed Virgin Mary because she shared in the compassion of the Blessed Mother. The following story may help you to understand what I mean by calling Saint Clare an image of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is from the Process of Canonisation. The Pope wanted to canonise St Clare at her funeral but was told he could not do this before a “process” (investigation of her life) was conducted. Nevertheless, Pope Alexander IV celebrated the Mass of Virgins at her funeral, indicating that he at least thought her a saint. The Process of her canonisation revealed that, just three days before Saint Clare’s death:

“Our most glorious Lady, the Blessed Virgin Mary, was especially preparing some of her garments for clothing this new saint [Clare]. While the witness was lost in this thought and image, she suddenly saw with her own eyes a great multitude of virgins, all dressed in white with crowns on their heads, coming and entering through the door of that room where the holy mother Clare was lying. Among these virgins, there was one greater, above and beyond what could be described, far more beautiful than all the others and wearing a crown upon her head larger than all the others. Above her crown, she had a golden cluster in the form of a thurible, from which such brilliance came forth that it seemed to illuminate the entire house. These virgins approached the bed of holy Lady Clare. That virgin who seemed greater at first covered the bed with the most delicate cloth so fine that, even though she was covered with it, Lady Clare nonetheless saw through its great delicacy. Then the virgin of virgins, who was the greater, inclined her face above the virgin Saint Clare or above her breast so that the witness could not discern one from the other. After this was done, they all disappeared.” [8]

The second story from the Process of Canonisation tells us that not only did Saint Clare, on the evening of Christmas 1252, hear and see the Mass of Christmas being celebrated in the Basilica of Saint Francis almost two kilometres away,[9] but *“she also saw the crib of our Lord Jesus Christ.”* [10]

**O Marvellous humility, O Astonishing poverty!
The King of Angels, The Lord of Heaven and Earth,
is laid in a manger!**

St Clare, Fourth Letter 20,21

Fr John Cooper OFM Cap
Capuchin National Spiritual Assistant OFS - Australia

[1] <https://www.biblestudytools.com/bible-study/topical-studies/things-you-didnt-know-about-seraphim.html>

[2] Exodus Ch. 3:2-6 “The angel of Yahweh appeared to him in a flame blazing from the middle of a bush.”

[3] Stigmata of Saint Francis of Assisi: 1 Celano 94-95; Bonaventure Legenda Major VI, 1-9; 2 Celano 135-138

[4] This year, 2014, we celebrated the 800th anniversary of this event at the Stigmata of St Francis.

[5] St. Paul’s 1st Letter to the Corinthians 13:13: “These *remain, faith, hope and love, and the greatest of them is love.*”

[6] Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap. Clare of Assisi, The Lady, Early Documents. New City Press, New York. 2005. pp. 422-424.

[7] The Internet says otherwise: <https://assisiproject.com/2018/03/23/the-five-wounds-of-christ/> also: <https://littleplantofstfrancis.blogspot.com/2012/08/st-clare-of-assisss-holy-wound-devotion.html>

[8] Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap. Clare of Assisi, The Lady, Early Documents “The Acts of the Canonization of Clare of Assisi” The Eleventh Witness: Sr Benvenuta of Lady Diambra of Assisi. pp. 181 and 182.

[9] Regis Armstrong “The Lady” The Legend of St Clare Chapter XIX No 29 p.306

[10] Regis Armstrong “The Lady” The Fourth Witness, Sr Amata, who was a niece of St Clare. p.165. It is not precisely clarified, but the indication is that St Clare through contemplation travelled back in time to Bethlehem, as she had done for the passion of Christ. See: Regis Armstrong “The Lady” The Legend of Saint Clare. Ch: XIX. p.p.307-308.