

**Clare of Assisi (c1193-1253):
mystical luminary**

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Abstract

March 18th, 2012 marks 800 years since the founding of the Poor Clares, commemorating the day that Chiara Offreduccio, now known as Clare of Assisi, rejected her affluent way of life and followed Francis in a life of poverty and prayer. Although fragile in health, Clare was a strong woman whose determination enabled her to obtain the “privilege of poverty” for her Order. Clare’s mysticism is essentially incarnational, scriptural and kenotic. Gleaned from a few letters to Agnes of Prague, Clare’s mysticism has continued to influence numerous people, lay and religious, over the last eight centuries.

Introduction

A momentous date for Franciscans world-wide is Palm Sunday, March 18th, 1212, when Clare of Assisi, Chiara Offreduccio, left her home and family and joined Francis and his early followers. Amidst great opposition from her family, Clare relinquished her aristocratic heritage and affluent way of life to embrace the path of poverty. March 18th 2012 was the 800th anniversary of this event, which is seen as the foundation of the Poor Clares. At the liturgy of Palm Sunday 1212, instead of approaching the altar with the other young maidens of Assisi, as a sign of their eligibility for marriage, to receive the customary palm, Clare remained in the pew. Surprisingly, the Bishop left the altar and presented Clare with a palm. Later that evening, the 18-year old Clare escaped from her affluent home and went to the small chapel of the Portiuncula, where Francis and his brothers welcomed her and accepted her as consecrated to Christ. As was the custom for members of religious orders, Clare’s hair was cut off, and she replaced her wealthy attire with a rough sackcloth habit. Although the male members of her family tried to physically bring her back home, they were unsuccessful. After some time with the Benedictine Sisters in Bastia, Clare moved to San Damiano, with her sister, Agnes, who by then had joined her. Later on, Clare was joined by her mother

and other noblewomen of Assisi. Clare remained at San Damiano for the remainder of her life, continuing the Franciscan heritage. As a dear friend and devoted follower of Francis, Clare initiated a completely new form of religious life for her time.

Clare has inspired countless women to follow in her footsteps, in a diversity of ways, each of which continues to express her own particular charism. Whilst undoubtedly a woman of her own time and constrained within the societal norms of the day, nevertheless Clare of Assisi can be seen as a luminary and a mentor, not only for her followers throughout history, but also for women and men in the 21st century. This premise will be tested by looking at the following elements of Clare's mystical thought: the incarnation; poverty; bridal mysticism; and the concept of the mirror.

First, however, a short discussion on the nature of mysticism will facilitate this analysis.

The nature of mysticism

What is mysticism? Who is a mystic? Are mystics psychological misfits or are they fully integrated human beings? Are they enclosed in "self" or are they deeply involved with the world and all its problems? Can one be mystical and not religious? While it is outside the scope of the present article to give detailed answers to these questions, it is nevertheless hoped that the analysis of Clare's mystical thought will shed light on the foregoing. In order to proceed, we will look briefly at the nature of mysticism. It is clear from even a brief foray into the subject that current interest in mysticism witnesses to a desire for access to the divine, a quest for an experience, a longing to live life in depth.

Mysticism can be described as "a passionate return to the Source" (Lanzetta 2001:16); "a heightened awareness of God's immediate and transforming presence" (McGinn 2005:19); "consciousness of union with the Divine, or the Ground of Being, or Ultimate Reality" (Kourie 1992:86). The "core of mysticism is the radical surrender of self to the loving embrace of the Other who is at the foundation of all life" (Perrin 2005:443). Certain extraordinary features may accompany the mystical state, for example ecstasy, visions, trance and locutions. However, these epiphenomena are not of the essence of mysticism. John of the Cross admonishes those who would rest in such transient spiritual experiences (Allison-Peers 1974:1:100). Mysticism is not just an isolated experience, having no bearing on life and behaviour. On the contrary, it impacts upon the totality of life, whereby the purifying, illuminating and transforming power of God transforms the mystic's entire being and consciousness. Mystics can be seen as paradigms of human authenticity; in many senses they are pioneers, opening windows on a life lived at great depth, shedding light on what is often hidden, and pointing

to a passionate encounter with Divine Beauty. They witness to the active infusion of Infinite Spirit into finite spirit.

Both Francis and Clare are clear examples of true mysticism. It is important at this stage to point out that Francis' mysticism differed from the speculative mysticism of both the Eastern and Western church of his day. The apophatic mysticism of Dionysius the Areopagite, representative of the speculative thought of the time, does not feature in Francis' thought: his visionary mysticism is prophetic, utilising the tradition of the prophets (Cousins 1983:164-5). Therefore, "In contrast to earlier mysticism which saw Christ as the eternal Logos and resurrected Lord, Francis focused on the incarnate Christ." Whereas, for Augustine, "Christ was primarily the Logos as interior Teacher of wisdom; [and] for Bernard of Clairvaux he was the interior Lover, the Bridegroom of the soul; for Francis he was his crucified Redeemer" (Cousins 1983:165). As such Francis' innovative devotional mysticism had a decisive place in the history of Western Christianity. Later, Bonaventure, in *The soul's journey into God*, would integrate Francis' experience "within the mainstream speculative, metaphysical, cosmological Neoplatonic tradition; and ... extend this tradition to encompass the devotional, Christ-centred focus of Francis with its mysticism of the historical event" (Cousins 1983:168).¹

Clare's mysticism follows closely that of Francis in his love for the Crucified. Clare does not dwell on ecstatic experiences, apart from the vision where she is nourished by "Mother Francis".² In general, therefore, her mysticism is not characterised by visions and unusual experiences, although these were not altogether absent.³ Furthermore, her mysticism was part of a larger whole which encompassed the totality of her religious life (Peterson 1993:250). Clare is clearly a strong woman, in spite of her physical frailty; her tenacity is evidenced in her determination to cling to the "privilege of poverty" so dear to Francis. This will be taken up later.

¹ See Delio (2008) for a discussion of Bonaventure, in particular the relevance of his thought to the discussion of the relationship of academic theology and spirituality.

² McGinn (1998:65) suggests that Clare's feeling of identity with Francis as a babe at his breast can explain why she refers to herself in diminutives throughout her writings. For example, inter alia she calls herself "a little plant of our most holy Father Francis" (Blessing of Clare:6. Testament of Clare:37,49. Armstrong (1998:82;60). However, such terminology cannot be cited as an example of Clare's servitude or subservience. Earlier hagiographical images of Clare as "disappearing" in Francis' shadow are currently replaced by an understanding of a "woman endowed with a powerful spiritual personality, courageous and tenacious in pursuit of her goal to follow the Christ who was poor and crucified" (Lachance 2001:58).

³ McGinn (1998:66) mentions that the Process for Clare's canonisation is "quite chary of speaking of her ecstatic experiences, mentioning only a rapture that kept her insensible for more than a whole day one Good Friday."

The mystical thought of Clare of Assisi

The Christocentric mysticism of Clare of Assisi is essentially scriptural and incarnational. Her writings are shot through with scripture quotations. Her reflections on scripture witness to the fact that hers is a mystical reading of scripture, which attempts to rediscover the inner dynamic of the text. This brings about transformation in the reader. A mystical interpretation allows us to experience the “excess of meaning” in the text which allows the text to come alive in the present. The myths of the Bible are seen to represent a living dialectic of our inner history, providing meaning for life; the symbols of scripture are constantly being transformed and revitalised. Although Clare, as a woman, was an illiterata, untrained in scholastic theology, nevertheless her insight into scripture and her deep theological understanding of the mysteries of the faith are certainly of a high order (McGinn 1998:66). Her sources would have been Scripture and the Liturgy of the Hours. Her letters to Agnes of Prague, written over a period of 19 years, are elegant and poetic and reflect Clare’s love for the Song of Songs and the gospel of Matthew, in particular the Sermon on the Mount (Armstrong 1993:26).

Incarnation

A major hermeneutical key to the understanding of scripture for Clare is the kenosis of Christ, as seen in the incarnation. A key text for Clare is Philippians 2:5-7: “Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (RSV). The lowly and suffering Christ who identified himself with the outcasts and the poor and weak is the one who, rich beyond measure, emptied himself to enrich his followers with grace and glory:

So great and good a Lord, ... chose to appear despised, needy and poor in this world (cf. 2 Cor 8:9), so that people who were in utter poverty, want and absolute need of heavenly nourishment might become rich in Him by possessing the kingdom of heaven ... You know ... that the kingdom of heaven is promised and given by the Lord only to the poor (cf. Mt 5:3) for she who loves temporal things loses the fruit of love (1L:19,20,25, Armstrong 1993:37).

The focus on the incarnation is a distinctly Franciscan charism and Clare’s path is one that “blends the unique capacity of the human person for God, and God’s total love for the human person shown in the crucified Christ”

(Delio 2004:140). The incarnation is the beginning of the reunification of all of humanity in Christ. In Clare's thought, the incarnation is not only the historical birth and life of Christ, but also a continuing transforming event. Underhill (1961:118) extends and sharpens this point, stating that the incarnation is a "perpetual cosmic and personal process ... [the] everlasting bringing-forth, in the universe and in the individual ascending soul, of the divine and perfect life, the pure character of God, of which the one historical life dramatised the essential constituents".

Clare's focus on the fact that God has come to us in the incarnation, and her particular emphasis on the crucified Christ, enables her to follow an evangelical spirituality, even though in practice she could not follow Francis' own radical path. Delio (2004:142) suggests that Clare's spiritual way is unique, in that it blends aspects of the monastic life with an evangelical-incarnational focus. The profound mystical dimension of Clare's life effected a way of living, in which the daily round, with its inevitable monotony, limitations and sorrow, was diffused with the life of God, the dynamic of the Spirit. Clare was aware that the eternal was unfolding itself in the midst of time, due to her belief that divinity was enfleshed in her very being. Consequently, a spiritual dynamic of immense power enabled Clare to endure even severe suffering with equanimity and joy. In the Process for her canonisation, it is stated:

While serious affliction of the body usually generates that of the spirit, it shone far differently in Clare. For she maintained a festive and joyful appearance in every one of her mortifications so that she seemed either not to feel her corporal afflictions or to laugh [at them]. From this, it is clearly given to our understanding that the holy joy with which she was flooded within overflowed without because the love of the heart lightens the scourges of the body (Armstrong 1988:208).

Clare lived a life of extreme renunciation and mortification, so much so that her health was permanently affected, leaving her confined to bed for most of her life at San Damiano. Her rigorous penance caused both Francis and Guido, the Bishop of Assisi, to intervene and insist that she reduce her austerities. However, in Clare's case, her suffering did not detract from her lifelong service to her sisters, as strongly attested in the Process of Canonisation. Furthermore, Clare's suffering can be seen in the light of a "mysticism of the historical event", in which the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus formed the dominant conceptual dynamic for her own experience. Cousins (1983:166) describes this approach as follows: "In this type of consciousness, one recalls a significant event in the past, enters into its drama and draws from it a spiritual energy, eventually moving beyond the event towards union

with God.” Being in Christ means being united to his death and resurrection; Clare was aware that spiritual fruitfulness is possible even amidst immense suffering. Human weakness is not an obstacle, but, on the contrary, it provides the ambience for divine activity. Clare partakes in the suffering of the Crucified derivatively, not in a supplementary fashion. The events themselves constitute the integrating structure of Christian existence, the particulars of which have to be worked out in each individual life. That this is ongoing in the life of the disciple is evidenced in 2 Cor 4:10: “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies”. Clare’s kenotic mysticism, therefore, results from her personal identification with the crucified Christ. As a result, she saw that sickness and suffering are a personalisation of the cross of Christ in her life, the salvific efficacy of which extends beyond the cloister walls to help effect the redemption of humanity. Lanzetta (2001:105) speaks of the transformative power of suffering: it “erases the self in order that one may contain the whole”. This transformation extends beyond the individual to society at large: “Our capacity for suffering is the means by which we transform the world ... suffering voluntarily endured becomes a redemptive force in history” (2001:106). Thus, the widespread “passion mysticism” which is a hallmark of medieval piety, and which has been an influential stratum of the religious consciousness of Christianity, featured strongly in Clare’s asceticism.⁴

Poverty

Clare uses the word “poverty” 41 times, in contrast to Francis, who uses it 16 times. Hers was a total dedication to absolute poverty in the religious life that she had chosen. Clare is well known as the only woman to write her own Rule (“Form of Life” in Clare’s terminology) which was deeply influenced by the Rule of Francis, and which was finally given papal approval by Pope Innocent IV, shortly before she died in 1253. Determined to cling to the ideals of Francis, Clare tenaciously insisted on the Privilege of Poverty for

⁴ Passion mysticism, redolent of medieval piety, does not feature so strongly in contemporary spirituality. Radical renunciation, fasting, mortification and penance are viewed with circumspection, since overemphasis on self-denial can in fact sometimes have the opposite effect, namely a preoccupation with “self”, instead of release and freedom. However, this is not to deny the fact that suffering can have a redemptive value; both medieval and contemporary mysticism witness to this fact. We are reminded of this in a letter written by Teilhard de Chardin to his sister: ‘O Marguerite, my sister, while I, given soul and body to the positive forces of the universe, was wandering over continents and oceans, my whole being passionately taken up in watching the intensification of all the earth’s tints and shadows, you were lying motionless, stretched out on your bed of sickness, silently deep within yourself, transforming into light the world’s most grievous shadows. In the eyes of the Creator, which of us, tell me, which of us will have had the better part?’ (quoted in Egan 1982:119).

the Poor Ladies of San Damiano, in contrast to other monastic communities, who owned property. This was an “audacious, confident poverty that rested trustingly on faith” (Armstrong 1993:23). Peterson (1993:335) says that Clare’s rule “was not born of youthful idealism, but was a record of her personal history at San Damiano with its hopes and hardships ... It is a gospel plan of poverty, humility, and love which had flourished at San Damiano and spread across the Western world”. Clare’s Rule clearly gives evidence of her strong and indomitable spirit, and her unique way of life. As such, Clare witnesses to the profound importance of women, at a time when women were woefully underestimated in church and society.⁵ As an “astute, judicious, and determined woman” she articulated her strong desire to follow the vision of the Gospel that Francis had given her (Armstrong 2008:140-141).

Clare’s adherence to absolute poverty, therefore, is an indication of her deep insight into the actuality of the Franciscan way of life, which “proposes the words and deeds of Jesus in the gospel as its basic guide; emphasising the humility of God revealed in his incarnation, the love manifested by Christ’s passion and the goodness of all creation” (Short 2005:310). In contrast to Francis, whose sudden and immediate experience of the poor, crucified Christ took place on his visit to San Damiano, Clare’s experience of intimacy with the poor Christ took place over 41 years within the walls of San Damiano (Armstrong 2008:137). Her deep experience of poverty was no doubt exacerbated by the following: firstly, the physical poverty of San Damiano, with its hardship and deprivation; secondly, her loss of health, which most probably began in 1224 and lasted for 29 years until her death; thirdly, the loss of her companions, either by death or by virtue of circumstances, as for example, the departure of her sister, Agnes, who left San Damiano to found the monastery in Monticello in 1230. Agnes’ letter to Clare, with its trenchant acknowledgement of her own loneliness, must have been a cause of sadness to Clare, and no doubt she too would have felt this separation very keenly. Finally, the death of Francis, who was her mentor, support and friend, was undoubtedly devastating (Armstrong 2008:137-138). Such experiences of absolute poverty taught Clare to “open herself to complete trust in God, to come before God with increasing confidence, and to rely every more steadfastly on His loving providence”. Armstrong (2008:139) extends this point in the following question “would it not be more accurate to say that what we so glibly speak of as ‘the charism’ is not poverty

⁵ Petersen (1993:92) in her analysis of the situation of medieval women comments on the fact that virginity was a way in which women could escape the oppressive social system of the time. Before 1212, Clare lived a communal lifestyle with the women of the Offreduccio household, not unlike that of the Beguines. Clare made private vows of poverty and chastity and she followed the teaching of Francis with respect to renunciation and poverty.

as much as it is a profound confidence and trust in a loving God that becomes the more unmistakable the more it is challenged?"

The Privilege of Poverty that was so dear to Clare's heart illustrates a central facet of her mystical thought, namely the fact that is not only a question of living without property, *sine proprio*, but also living in poverty of spirit. Outward renunciation is of no value unless it facilitates inner emptiness, in order to be filled with the fullness of Christ. For Clare, Jesus is the paradigm, exemplar and enabler who teaches his followers what it means to know God in mystical simplicity and to live a kenotic life. Clare exhorts Agnes of Prague: "as a poor virgin, embrace the poor Christ. Look upon him who became contemptible for you, and follow Him, making yourself contemptible in this world for Him" (2L:18, 19. Armstrong 1993:42). Such poverty is a source of great richness, and manifests the utter condescension of the Most High:

O blessed poverty, who bestows eternal riches on those who love and embrace her! O holy poverty, God promises the kingdom of heaven and, in fact, offers eternal glory and a blessed life to those who possess and desire you ... O God-centred poverty, whom the Lord Jesus Christ Who ruled and now rules heaven and earth, Who spoke and things were made, condescended to embrace before all else ... Since contempt of the world has pleased you more than its honours, poverty more than earthly riches, and you have sought to store up greater treasures in heaven rather than on earth ... your reward is very rich in heaven (Mt 5:12) (1L:15-17; 22-23. Armstrong 1993:37).

Dispossession of spirit leads to a mystical emptiness, which is not void but filled with the fullness of the Divine. Poverty is not an end in itself, but leads the adherent into ever-deeper levels of interiority, where the mystical marriage takes place. John of the Cross speaks powerfully of this secret indwelling in the Living Flame of Love:

Where He dwells with the greatest content and most completely alone is in the soul wherein dwell fewest desires and pleasures of its own ... And the more completely alone does He dwell in the soul, the more secretly He dwells; and thus in this soul wherein dwells no desire, neither any other image or form or affection of aught that is created, the Beloved dwells most secretly, with more intimate, more interior and closer embrace, according as the soul, as we say, is the more purely

and completely withdrawn from all save God (Allison-Peers (1974:III:193).

Such emptiness leads us to the depths of one's being, where all epistemic certainties are released and freedom from self-absorption is attained. This allows for a quantum leap in consciousness, whereby we are set free from the multiplicity of the "crowds" – the agents of the soul and their activities: memory, understanding and will in all their diversifications. As Eckhart states: "When I come to the point when I no longer project myself into any image ... then I can be transported into God's naked being – this is the pure essence of the Spirit" (Fox 1991:328). Eckhart relies heavily on the Dionysian concepts of "nothingness" and "unknowingness", which he develops in his concept of the "simple ground ... the quiet desert, into which distinction never gazed ... for this ground is a simple silence, in itself immovable, and by this immovability all things are moved, all life is received" (McGinn 2001:46). There is a Zen-like quality to Eckhart's mysticism: "Leave place, leave time; avoid ... image; go forth without a way on the narrow path; then you will find the desert track" (McGinn 2001:114).

Clare did not praise poverty for its own sake, but praises it for its fruits in the minds and hearts of those who embrace it: "O blessed poverty, who bestows eternal riches on those who love and embrace her, O holy poverty, God promises the kingdom of heaven, and in fact, offers eternal glory and a blessed life to those who possess and desire you!" (1L:15-16. Armstrong 1993:36). Clare experienced union with the Divine in mystical emptiness and poverty of spirit. Her kenotic mysticism is not an end in itself, but a means of being filled by and transformed into God, which effected joy and a "lightness of living", so that she can encourage Agnes of Prague to continue "with swift pace, light step, unswerving feet, so that even your steps stir up no dust, [so that] you go forward securely, joyfully, and swiftly, on the path of prudent happiness" (2L:13-14. Armstrong 1993:41). Clare sees poverty as "a form of liberation" which effects a "dance of kenosis in the embrace of the kenotic Christ" (Karecki nd:8). Inner and outer poverty frees us from fear and anxiety and allows us to live in the present moment, where the kingdom of heaven is to be found. Living mindfully brings us to the miracle of eternity: heaven exists in the ground of our being, not virtually, but actually.⁶

⁶ Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese monk, in his book *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*, says: "To live in the present moment is a miracle ... Peace is all around us ... us ... we need only to find ways to bring our body and mind back to the present moment so that we can touch what is refreshing, healing and wondrous" (in Pierce 2005:15).

Bridal mysticism

The idea of the soul as the bride of the Divine forms a powerful leitmotif in Christian mysticism, particularly with respect to a spiritual reading of the Song of Songs, by Origen (c 185-c253) and Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) among others.⁷ The concept is not confined to female mystics; for example, Francis speaks of the mystical marriage to “Lady Poverty” (Jansen 2005:156). With respect to the difficulties involved concerning the notion of mystical marriage for the male, Perumpallikunnel (2009:49-50) makes the point that “for male mystics, to take a feminine role is particularly radical – they must set aside their essential maleness for the sake of spiritual growth”; indeed, some will ‘strive to cultivate feminine qualities to strengthen the spiritual marriage’.⁸ Different metaphors try to encapsulate this problematic, for example that of courtly mysticism, whereby the soul is a lover of a “highborn mistress” (Jansen 2005:156). The fluidity of the notion of mystical marriage with respect to gender is also seen in Bernard of Clairvaux, who speaks of himself and his monks as brides; he also uses bodily images to delineate the highest spiritual good, union with God, and thus integrates the “erotic and the holy” (Jansen 2005:156). Of prime importance is the fact that “sexuality is sacred when it takes us towards God [it] can lead to the most intimate and transforming relationship possible, culminating in total absorption in God’s fullness” (Perumpallikunnel 2009:51).⁹ Medieval mystics and

⁷ This imagery is not limited to the Christian tradition. See Perumpallikunnel (2009:45-53) for a survey of this theme in other religious traditions. See also his survey of Christian bridal mysticism (2009:53-68). For an interesting discussion of antecedent types of spiritual marriage, particularly in Hellenistic Judaism, see Horsley (1979). In the Sufi tradition, spousal imagery is used by the 8th century (CE) mystic Rabi’a al’Adawiyya. She is reputed to have refused an offer of marriage on the grounds that ‘[t]he contract of marriage is for those who have a phenomenal existence (i.e. who are concerned with the affairs of the material world). Here (i.e. in my case) existence has ceased, since I have ceased to exist and have passed out of Self. My existence is in Him, and I am altogether His. I am in the shadow of His command. The marriage contract must be asked for, from Him, not from me’ (Smith 1984:13).

⁸ Perumpallikunnel (2009:50-51) gives the examples of Nammalvar, a South Indian saint, and Sri Ramakrishna, a 19th-century Indian saint, who exemplify this phenomenon.

⁹ Van Dyke (2010:728-732), in her analysis of medieval affective mysticism, makes several important points: firstly, the emphasis on the physical and emotional, as well as both intellectual and volitional union with God, undermines a dualistic approach to the human person. “By focusing on the incarnate Christ – whose bleeding, broken body plays an extremely important role in ... medieval mysticism – the affective mystic tradition links matter and the physical body directly to the divine”; secondly, the increase in affective spirituality, particularly from the 13th century, can be seen partially as a reaction against the absolute dualism of the Cathars; thirdly, the stress on the physical humanity of Christ counters the suggestion that the material was negative; this undermines a Platonic and Neoplatonic identification of self with soul and parallels more closely an Aristotelian hylomorphic conception of the human being as a unified composite of body and soul; and

many who followed continued within this framework to refer to mystical marriage as the culmination of the union of the lover with the Beloved; for example, Jan van Ruusbroec (1293-1381), Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) and John of the Cross (1542-1591).¹⁰

Clare's exposition of nuptial imagery was influenced by Bernard of Clairvaux, whose spiritual interpretation of the Song of Songs forms the bedrock for individual and corporate mystical union: "The focus of Bernard's bridal mysticism is on the incarnate Christ, and the goal is the ecstatic union of bride and bridegroom; by being united with the incarnate Christ, the community of believers and the individual Christian soul become ultimately united with God" (Perumpallikunnel 2009:62).¹¹ Bernard's emphasis on the humanity of Christ and the centrality of love was taken up and developed by Clare; her Christocentric mysticism concentrated on the poor and crucified Jesus. This "new [Franciscan] tonality" can be seen in six powerful passages in the letters to Agnes which use the language of nuptial union (McGinn 1998:67). For example, in Clare's second letter to Agnes, on the occasion of her religious consecration, she writes, "Your Spouse, though more beautiful than the children of men (Ps 44:3) became, for your salvation, the lowest of men, was despised, struck, scourged untold times through His entire body, and then died amid the suffering of the Cross" (2L Ag:20 Peterson 1993:289). Following Bernard, Clare illustrates the primacy of Wisdom; she identifies the human, suffering and crucified Jesus in the personification of Wisdom as "that spotless mirror of God; the Word of God is the mirror of God. It is the figure of Wisdom, 'the mirror without blemish' which reflects the glory of God and radiates both wisdom and knowledge of God ... Wisdom and the Logos are one" (Peterson 1993:295).

Mirror

Clare takes the Pauline simile of the mirror (1 Cor 13:12; 2 Cor 3:18) and refers to the poor and lowly Christ as a mirror, the *speculum perfectionis*.¹² She exhorts Agnes of Prague to gaze upon that mirror each day, for "blessed poverty, holy humility, and inexpressible charity are reflected in that mirror"

fourthly, the Incarnation is seen as divinising the material – it is a guarantee of humanity's incorporation into the Divine.

¹⁰ Mystical marriage does not mean that once the mystic has entered into this union, he/she can stay on the summit, basking in glory! On the contrary, it leads to spiritual fruition and necessitates an increase of activity. Teresa of Avila embarked on the reform of the Carmelite order when she was over 50 years old; Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), after an intense period of withdrawal, dominated the political and ecclesial scene of her time.

¹¹ See McGinn (1994:158-224) for a detailed exposition of Bernard's thought, including its ecclesial ramifications.

¹² The motif of the mirror, the *speculum*, is used nine times in Clare's writings, and is not found in Francis' work.

(4L:15,18. Armstrong 1993:50). Earlier, in the same letter, Clare refers to Christ as the “splendour of eternal glory ... the brilliance of eternal light and the mirror without blemish” (4L:14.1993:50). This is a reference to Wisdom, who is “a reflection of the eternal light, untarnished mirror of God’s active power, image of his goodness” (Wisdom 7:26. Jerusalem Bible). Clare suggests that Agnes contemplate the three essential virtues of Franciscan life in the Christ-mirror: poverty, humility and charity. Poverty and humility, as seen in Jesus’ birth in a manger, are to be found at the “beginning” (*principium*) or the edge or rim of the mirror; the surface (*medium*) of the mirror manifests the same virtues in Jesus’ life; and the depth (*finis*) of the mirror allows Agnes to contemplate the supreme charity portrayed in the crucifixion of Jesus (McGinn 1998:68.69). Again, Clare urges Agnes to:

Place your mind before the mirror of eternity! Place your soul in the brilliance of glory! Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance! And transform your entire being into the image of the Godhead Itself through contemplation. So that you too may feel what His friends feel, as they taste the hidden sweetness that God Himself has reserved from the beginning for those who love Him (3L:12-14. Armstrong 1993:45).

Clare’s admonition to Agnes to place her mind, soul and heart in the figure of divine substance has a Trinitarian resonance; Clare is showing Agnes how to allow herself to be transformed into the image of God through this mystical prayer (Peterson 1993:281-282). Clare’s way of contemplation does not follow the Neoplatonic way of ascent, climbing a ladder to the Divine.

Rather, Clare’s notion of contemplation, like that of Francis, begins in the encounter with the other, that is, the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ. Contemplation is not climbing a ladder but a gazing upon the other in such a way that ultimately one is drawn into the other, not by way of absorption but by way of differentiation (Delio 2004:141).

Gazing upon Divine Beauty, one becomes beautiful; contemplation effects transformation.

Gregory of Nyssa (c335-394) speaks of the mirror of the soul that can turn towards either earthly or heavenly things. Divine beauty is manifested in virtue, just as a mirror shows the rays of the sun, since the sun itself cannot be seen directly (Peterson 1993:283). Augustine speaks of the mirror of scripture, and Hugh of St Victor comments as follows on the Rule of Augustine: “read this book until you know it by heart ... and it is rightly called a mirror; for we can see in it as a mirror in what state we are, whether beautiful

of deformed, just or unjust” (quoted in Peterson 1993:284). By studying one’s face in the mirror of the cross, one becomes more authentic. True authenticity arises when we “discover the treasure within, the image of God in which we are created and by which we are in relationship with God” (Delio 2004:146). The unique nature of a human being is clearly reflected in his or her face. One’s personal identity is disclosed in the face. Delio (2004:146) illustrates this point by her reference to the philosopher Levinas, who says that “the face of the genuine other should release us from all desire for totality and open us to a true sense of the infinite because inscribed in the face of the other is the trace of transcendence. One cannot grasp the other in knowledge, for the other is infinite and overflows in the totality of comprehension and of being”. The Face is the very essence of Levinas’ thought; it is the Face of the Other and the Other is God (Blaha 2003:157). Levinas speaks about being wounded by the Infinite, and awakened to the proximity of the other (Waaajman 2002:401).

Clare is an “example and mirror” in her care for her sisters, although beset by poor health herself (Short 2005:311). She also exhorts the community to be a “mirror and example to those living in the world” (Testament:19-20. Armstrong 1993:57). Karecki (nd:10), in her analysis of Clare’s service of leadership, speaks of Clare’s “foot-washing” ministry – she served her sisters in humility and exhorted them to do likewise. By showing compassion and love for our neighbour, we become more our true selves; by becoming our true selves, we become Christ. Thus, Clare exhorts her sisters: “Since the Lord has called us to such great things that those who are to be a mirror and example to others may be reflected in us, we are greatly bound to bless and praise God and be all the more strengthened to do good in the Lord” (Testament: 21-22. Armstrong 1993:57).

Jan van Ruusbroec (1293-1381) takes up the simile of the mirror in his discussion of the mystical ascent of the soul. He speaks of the “impress of its eternal image” with respect to the created nature of the human being, “just like an untarnished mirror in which the image is constantly dwelling” (Mommaers & Van Bragt 1995:117). The mirror, for Ruusbroec, is not only the dim earthly vision of God by the adherent, but also God’s clear perception of men and women as they were first begotten and made to be like God and to be one with God in the essential unity of the Godhead. Thus the admonition to ‘live toward the Image’, that is, the image of the Son of God that is imprinted in the human person (Kourie 2008:144). In Christ, who is the flawless mirror and irradiation of the glory of God, the individual and all of creation is drawn out of the essential implicitness in the divine Unity and are distinguished in the Father’s knowledge. The intimate union with the Divine is such that God’s image “fills the mirror of our soul to overflowing, so that no other light or image can enter there” (Wiseman 1985:27). An interesting parallel with respect to the concept of the “mirror” occurs in the

Taoist mystic Chuang-tzu, who uses the mirror to represent the calm, empty mind of the wise person. “The sage’s mind in stillness is the mirror of Heaven and Earth, the glass of ten thousand things.” The mind has to be kept clear and empty of distraction: “If a mirror is bright, no dust settles on it; if dust settles, it isn’t really bright” (Ching 1983:238). Likewise, Hsun-Tzu, a Confucian rationalist, speaks about the necessity of emptiness, unity and stillness. Such qualities belong to the symbol of a mirror, or clear water: “Emptiness, unity, and stillness – these are the qualities of great and pure enlightenment ... He who has such enlightenment ... has a penetrating insight into all beings ... and masters the great principle and all that is in the universe” (Ching 1983:237).

Clare’s mysticism is characterised by freedom and transformation. Although the centrality of the cross is paramount, nonetheless this does not mean that her emphasis is on sin and guilt. On the contrary, the cross is “the mirror of truth, where we come to see ourselves in our capacity to love and in our brokenness”; and “dwelling in the mirror of the crucified Christ is to lead to that place of inner freedom, a freedom that is born of the joy of the Spirit (4LAG: 4) and of union with the Spouse (4LAG 14)” (Delio 2004:147). Continually gazing into the mirror, Clare finds the truth of her own being. Such contemplation is not escapism; rather, the one who “puts on Christ” also sees the pain and suffering of the other. Compassion and service result from this union with the Divine, encompassing all who are in need. As Delio (2004:151) says: “For a woman who lived outside the market place in the solitude of San Damiano, Clare had profound insight with regard to the renewal of the Gospel life and the life of the Church ... Clare’s evangelical spirituality is ecclesial in nature ... Whoever is transformed in the mirror of Christ is called to radiate and manifest this image, bearing witness to the risen Christ.”¹³

Contemplating Christ crucified, gazing upon the mirror where true poverty, humility and charity are reflected (4L:18. Armstrong 1993:50) effects the gift of silence. Silence and solitude are essential to bring about unification and integration in the depths of the personality. In this inward quietness love pervades and discursive thought is abandoned. The silence of ever-deepening intimacy with Divine Beauty leads to the ultimate silence of mystical union. Such silence can be of greater redemptive value than many words. Although the intellect, imagination and will are silenced and emotional energies are stilled, nevertheless this is not a state of quietest apathy, but on the contrary, one of intense awareness. “Attention”, *sati*, as practiced

¹³ Lachance (2001:71-72) speaks of the social message of Clare as one of openness to the world and at the service of the poor. Both Francis and Clare exhibited a way of being in the world that was “humble and dispossessed ... without pretense, and that made no claims to rights or privileges for themselves ... [they were] active and creative messengers of peace for their time”.

in Theravada Buddhist “insight” (*vipassana*) meditation, brings about a sea of stillness, a totally alert state of consciousness. Such attention is seeing with the eyes of the spirit, an awareness of inner realities, a gaze fixed on the Invisible.

As with many other mystics, Clare experienced the Inexpressible:

Because God is not experienced through reason but by intuition, the soul struggles with the impossibility of describing mystical union. The mind is plunged into the infinity of God and can only vaguely comprehend the action in the soul. The finite mind can never perceive God’s essence; it can only be impressed with the transcendence, joy and burning love which fill the soul yet cannot be expressed. For most mystics, as for Clare, union with God produces a profound sense of joy (Peterson 1993:286).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the following observations may be made. Firstly, although Clare of Assisi lived in a different era from ours, nevertheless her mystical thought has just as much validity for the 21st century. Clearly, her extreme asceticism does not resonate well in contemporary society; indeed, aspects of her mortification are questionable. In addition, few people are able to follow her extreme poverty, *sine proprio*, and her life of enclosure. However, her identification with the lowly and crucified Christ, her self-forgetfulness, care and compassion for the Other and others are just as pertinent today as in her own time. Secondly, Clare’s external poverty leads to inner poverty of spirit, which is much needed in our time. In an age where many are disillusioned with consumerism and corporate and individual greed, numerous people are seeking a deep inner life and spirituality. There is what can be called a “spiritual revolution”, whereby many are looking for an authentic and integrated life and the fullness of what it means to be human. Clare is, in a simple and profound manner, a mentor who teaches us how to enter within, beyond the different layers of selfhood, and transcend the narrow surface-ego. By dying to self-centred attitudes, the mystic is simultaneously reborn to a new life of free and generous love and service. Finally, by steadfastly gazing into the Christ-mirror, Clare says, we will be transformed into the image of Divine Beauty, and thus will help a world so much in need of beauty, love and peace. Therefore it is true to say that despite the brevity of Clare’s writings, she can indeed be seen not only as one of the important mystics of the 13th century, but also as a strong exemplar for our time. In spite of physical frailty, Clare was clearly a powerful and determined woman. As stated in the Bull of Canonisation:

She was kept inside, and remained outside. Clare was hidden, yet her way of life was open. Clare kept silent, but her fame cried out. She was concealed in a cell, but she was taught in the cities. It is no wonder that so bright and gleaming a light could not be hidden, but must shine forth and give a clear light in the Lord's house (McGinn 1998:69).

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