

Today, August 11 is the feast of St. Clare of Assisi. She is often called the Little Plant of St. Francis because she was like a second St. Francis. She was the first woman to come to him who wanted to live a life of poverty and penance just like Francis and his brothers. In 1212, on the evening of Palm Sunday, Clare absconded from her family and was met in torchlight by the brothers. As a symbol of her consecration Francis had her hair shorn before escorting her that very evening to a monastery where she could hide from her family. After her family reluctantly assented to her religious commitment, she lived with other Franciscan sisters a life of deep prayer and intense poverty enclosed at the church of San Damiano.

She suffered ill health even before Francis died and feared dying before he did. But after Francis died, she lived 26 more years. At a time when the Franciscan order was deeply divided on how to live the evangelical counsel of poverty, she remained true to the vision of Francis. Despite her ill health, she insisted on the privilege of poverty for her and her sisters, resisting bishops, cardinals, and popes, who sought to ease the rule of poverty the Poor Ladies lived under.

Clare's practice of prayer included gazing on the crucified Christ as a mirror to the soul. Her few but profound precepts on prayer are preserved in four letters to Agnes of Prague. She became the first woman to write a rule of religious life, which was approved by Pope Innocent IV just days before her death. A copy of the rule impressed with the pope's seal reached her the day before she died.

Clare's courage to insist on the privilege of poverty and her practice of gazing on the Crucified Lord inspire Franciscans to this day.

In her third letter to Agnes, St. Clare wrote the following:

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, through contemplation,
transform your entire being into the image
of the Godhead Itself,
so that you may feel what friends feel
in tasting the hidden sweetness
that, from the beginning,
God Himself has reserved for His lovers.

By Bro. Jim Jantz, OFP