

Briege O'Hare Retreat, Stella Niagara, August 10-13, 2005

Session Two

We have been looking at the mission of Clare and her sisters and indeed all of us as Franciscans is to be women of light.

It is interesting that when St. Bonaventure was writing the Major Life of Francis, he wanted to sum up what Francis was all about. Notice the language he chooses. "The Most High God gave Francis as a light for the leaders that, by bearing witness to the Light, he might prepare for the Lord a way of life and peace in the hearts of his faithful. Shining with the splendor of his life and teaching, like the morning star in the midst of clouds, by his resplendent rays he guided into the light all those sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death."

If you want a beautiful description of your vocation, there it is! Each one of us is called to be that. Each one of us is called to be like the Morning Star in the midst of the clouds. By our resplendent rays we guide into the light those who are sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death.

Extraordinary language! You can see both Bonaventure, Celano and all the writers seem to use this word Light for both Francis and Clare. Somehow they are the light, the revelation of the gospel. The gospel is not a book written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, that's not the gospel. The gospel is the Good News that Christ is risen and we have his life among us. In fact, we now are the Christ. We shine the Christ light to people.

How are we the light? Jesus said, "I am the Light of the world." We remember that and quote it a lot. We forget the other bit where He said, "You are the light of the world." We are light for the world, a world walking in darkness. How do we become it? We are going to look at Clare's story and see how she became light? We will take our lessons from her.

The first thing we have to do is to discover in ourselves "the lover", the archetypal lover that is in each of us. If we don't know how to love, or to be in love we will never be light. We might be good, we might be morally behaved, we might do good things, we might do a lot of good work for people but we are part of the people who walk in darkness, because it is from the capacity to love that light flows.

Listen to the early text of the Legend of Clare. We looked earlier at the prophecies of Clare, now we are going to look at the beginnings of Clare in the story, paragraph 5 of the Legend. "...hearing of the celebrated name of Francis who, like, a new man was renewing with new virtues the way of perfection forgotten by the world." This is an interesting language because the world is constantly forgetting the message of the Gospel and substituting it with religious culture. It is constantly forgetting that Jesus came, and I say this guardedly because I'll hopefully explain it later, He came to put an end to religion. He came to say the time is fulfilled, you no longer need to be in a religious culture. Those days are gone. He himself was accused of betraying his own religious culture. He came to free us into our true being that needs religion, we do need religion, in that it is kind of a nest where the chicks get fed until they are ready to fly. But if we never fly

then the religion has failed us. So Francis was like a new man, he was renewing the way of perfection forgotten by the world, the way of the fullness of life, the freedom of the Gospel life forgotten. And she heard about him and was excited and wanted to meet him. We are told in the Legend that he visited her, and I'm quoting, "and she more frequently visited him." These meetings were secret. They had to moderate the times of their visits so that this divine pursuit could not be perceived by anyone, nor objected to by gossip "...with one close companion accompanying her the young girl leaving her paternal home frequented the clandestine meetings with this man of God whose words seemed to her to be on fire. Now what was happening for Clare is part of the spiritual evolution of a human being.

We are meant to evolve spiritually. God has a whole kind of process built into our spiritual systems that they will evolve through and one of the tragedies for us as human beings is that we stop evolving and it's a shame.

I find the Vedic tradition helps me to get a sense of what this is about, we can identify Clare's story. Every human being is meant to make a transition from unconscious belonging or unity which we have before we are born into conscious unity, which we will have forever, that is to say we will be united with God and with everybody.

Now our whole life is a journey from the unconscious unity, like when the child is in the mother's womb it's not conscious of its unity with the mother, it just thinks it is the mother. That's unconscious unity and we move right towards conscious union with everything.

Now, in the Vedic tradition there are four stages in this evolutionary process. I find them really helpful in understanding Clare and in understanding myself. The first stage is what you call Waking Consciousness. That doesn't mean that you come to consciousness, it means that you become conscious of existing. That's about it. Some people never get past that one. You become conscious that you exist.

A baby is not conscious of its existence for quite a while. And then you become conscious of the social mind, the religious culture that you inherit and the social culture that you inherit. The kind of food that you eat and so on, you are given all this as part of social conditioning, the kind of social laws that you are required to obey. And also the religious culture, devotions, and the kind of hymns you sing, the religious practices, and so on. Now that's stage one and that is just barely awake type of an existence. Clare was in that stage in her early childhood, she was part of all that, though she was regarded as an unusual child and a very saintly child.

The next stage is what in the East they call Dreaming Consciousness. Now this does not mean that your sort of dreams of your sleep, it means dreams in the sense of your ideologies, your ideals, the things you want to do with life, the things you want to achieve, and so on. You begin to relate to God through wanting to serve God. You've moved from just floating along with the social culture or the social mind, you want to serve God, you begin to have a sense of self, and you want to give your life in doing good things. You do it through sacrificing of yourself in good works, service, and through your honoring of God through rituals, prayer and community prayers

and rituals and so on. This is very nice to get to this point but it's still not very far along. We tend to stop there. A lot of us tend to stop there. We tend to think I'm giving my life to God, I'm serving God, I'm doing my apostolate, I'm saying my prayers, I'm going to Mass, I'm fulfilling my religious duties, I'm fulfilling my obligations to my community. I attend the meetings and do all the nice things and so on. That's nice, that's great but so long as we're in that type of consciousness we're not light. We're in darkness because basically it's a consciousness of conformity.

When Clare heard of Francis she was moving into another level, she was extraordinary. She was only 17. This happens to all of us around this age, perhaps a little later to some of us. We experience what they call in the East Deep Sleep consciousness. What that means is that we move from seeing our identity in the social reality, social norms and expectations. We begin to discover that there is something within us, something burning for life that is uniquely us.

This is awakened in us by God quite young. I suspect you can remember when that happened to you. It was probably that which caused you to enter religious life. I often hear our sisters saying, you know before I entered I had a very deep prayer life, then when I entered they knocked it all out of me and told me I had to pray some other way. Actually, that was a dreadful thing because it disconnected us from that beautiful point where God was taking us into a wonderful space. I think this would not have happened to Clare because in her time and her circumstances that type of conditioning was not going to be imposed upon her.

My observation about this Deep Sleep consciousness is that it usually dies in us, then when we get to middle life it sometimes starts to push through again and to demand attention. This is "make it or break it time," we have got to choose it then. The characteristics of this level is that it is the time to enter into the desert, symbolically. It's the time when no one understands what you are about because you are claiming something that is unique, special to your spiritual nature. It's a time when God calls you to separate from identifying yourself with the external realities of your life and to discover the beauty of your inner being.

The reality about this is that there is no established path; nobody can tell you how to do it. There are certain characteristics that are common to all of us. Listen to it in Clare's story. The Legend tells us that when she heard Francis, the first thing we are told in the Legend is that his words to her seemed to be on fire. It was because he was touching very delicately, very sensitively, that part of her that was her unique spirit, and he was calling it into its life and he was giving her permission to be that unique human being, not the one that the social expectation of her family had imposed upon her. He was saying, no, it is this person that needs to live. We are told in nice Medieval romantic language he whispered in her ears of a sweet espousal with Christ. We may not be comfortable with espousal language but that does not matter. What matters is that he whispered in her ears the possibility of love at its most profound, love at its most beautiful, love at its deepest. That is experienced in Christ.

Until we fall in love, and I don't care who you fall in love with, doesn't matter, but until we fall in love and know the experience of union with another one, another person, another beloved. We'll

talk later about this union because it's one of the deepest things Jesus tried to teach us, how to love in that way. He constantly spoke about it to his beloved disciples before he died. "Make your home in me as I make my home in you." You make your home in each other, in this mutual indwelling is what love is about. Anyone who experiences that love in another human being is greatly blessed. It is a gift from God. But until we do, and it is Teilhard de Chardin who says (one of the things he's understood through science) is that it is union that differentiates. This is a marvelous paradox. Union differentiates, in other words, until you find yourself in union with the beloved one you do not know who you are, you do not know your different self, your unique self. You only discover yourself through being united with another.

So, if we are to move into this level of discovering our true being we have to fall in love. It doesn't have to be with Jesus. More likely than not it won't be, but it might be. Problem is, if you haven't been in love or loved or experienced intimacy with another human being we are inclined to project that onto Jesus and then that can be a little bit sick. We sentimentalize Jesus, and the whole point of Jesus is that he came to give us light so that we find it in each other. So Christ is our light. The source of all the light among us.

We are told in the Legend that immediately when she understood that she was a being created for love, "immediately an insight into eternal joy was open to her, that whose vision the world itself would become worthless". Now she wasn't rejecting the earth or people, the values of this world no longer meant anything to her as they shouldn't to us. We are a contradiction in this world. We are not people who value the things this world values, like wealth or status or achievement or whatever it is the world seems to think is important. It's irrelevant to us because we have a new life and this new life, we're told, Clare desired it intensely, she yearned for it and longed to leave her home so she could have it. And then the Legend goes on with this wonderful phrase, three marvelous words that I love couldn't be more simple, "on that night." This is her escape from her home. This is her third level of consciousness, going out into the night, going out into the desert. Going away from all the social conformities and religious conformities, in search of our true being in God. It is a going out into the night. "On that night" she embarked upon her long desired flight with a virtuous companion. Then we're told that she was not meant to leave by way of the usual door, marveling at her strength she broke open with her own hands the door that is customarily blocked by wood and stone. We know that that is the door of death. It was only used for taking coffins in and out of a home. And she chose the door of death, this is very, very symbolic. She chose the door of death. She was dying to her old way of living, her family identity. She was dying to that. She was taking a new identity which is in Christ.

Listen to what Paul says in Colossians 3 about that because if we don't get this we are struggling to be something, and there is no point, because we don't have to be anything. We spend our lives trying to become something. That is wasted energy. I remember being taught as a novice that I had to become perfect, I had to become a saint, I had to become holy, I had to become a good Poor Clare. I had to become God knows what. It's taken me 40 years to find out that I didn't

have to become anything. I already am made in the image of God. All I have to do is let it unfold. But that's the trick.

Listen to what Paul says in Colossians 3, "since you have been brought back to true life in Christ" - to the life that your family conditioned you in, the life that your Church conditioned you in, forget it! You have been brought back to the true life in Christ. So you "look for the things that are in heaven:" that is you look for spiritual realities, "where Christ is sitting on God's right hand." "Let your thoughts be on heavenly things, not on things that are on the earth, because you have died. This is the door of death. Have you gone through it yet? You need to figure that out for yourself. Have you gone through the door of death or are you still clinging to your old self, the one that wants to be approved of, the one who wants a little bit of position. I don't know how the old self operates, but I can tell you it's subtle. We don't entirely get away from it but if we become conscious of it, it's a great help. "You have died," Paul says, "and the life you have is hidden with Christ in God."

We have the most beautiful inner life which the world does not see. I don't know if you know this, but in case you don't, you are not who you think you are! You are not your personality. I am not my personality. The person you see standing up here is not the person my community lives with. (You should ask them!) We are all acting out of an ego; it's a constructive persona that I have to use, otherwise how am I going to get all of this across to you? I have to do this. But if I think that this is who I am, I'm in big trouble; big, big trouble. I know that isn't who I am, so I'm not too worried. I use this persona while I'm up here: I'm really quite a shy person. We're not our personality; that's something we have constructed and we need it in order to survive in the world. Your true being, your true nature is hidden with Christ in God and it is beautiful. And whether you know it or not it is infinitely intelligent. It is supremely wise. It has a capacity that is divine for compassion, for goodness, for love. It is beyond anything we could imagine. It is who each one of us is inside. That is the new life given to us by Christ. It is our unique nature. It is not as though there is a little Jesus sitting inside being these things. I am these things. Given my true nature now given to me by God but it is my nature.

Theologically, we have to get this very clear. When we talk about Christ in us, what do we mean? Christ is in us, Christ is in you? We love this in Ireland, "Christ above me, Christ below me, Christ behind me, Christ in front of me, Christ to my right, Christ to my left," It's all true. Terrific! But what does it mean, this Christ life? Jesus is the Christ. Jesus who walked in Nazareth, in Palestine, He is the Christ. Without Jesus there is no Christ. But the Christ is more than Jesus. That is the theological distinction that we have to understand. The Christ is more than Jesus. We are the Christ. Each one of us now is the Beloved of God, the manifestation of the Divine. We have everything in Christ in ourselves. It's a beautiful life, this Christ's life in us. Uniquely us. The Christ nature in me is not the Christ nature in you. It is uniquely each one of us. This is the gift we've been given.

Paul tells us in Colossians that it is hidden. Then he says, "...but when Christ is revealed," because that hasn't happened yet, "you too, will be revealed in all your glory with him." In other words,

the true beauty that is in each of us will be manifested before the whole of creation. You know, when we meet in the next life we are going to spend a whole lot of time in eternity saying to one another, wow, I had no idea you were so beautiful. For some of us that is immensely consoling, but it's true. Now to claim this life, to live from this life is our purpose on this earth. So if we are messing about just trying to be a good Briege or a good whatever we are just putting our energies down, it's meaningless, just forget it. Let this beautiful life unfold from you. Just let it unfold. And Clare will teach us how to do that.

Now we have a wonderful example of what is involved in this, in the wonderful chapter in the Song of Songs which I always find connects with this text in the Legend "on that night" and it connects with what I was talking about in this third level of consciousness, Deep Sleep consciousness. Deep Sleep consciousness, this is the time when we move into the deepest dimension of ourselves and become conscious of that beautiful inner life.

Notice the opening, verse two of chapter five of the Song of Songs, I slept or "I sleep but my heart is awake," that just about sums it up. I sleep but my heart is awake. We go to sleep in terms of this world's values. When I say this world's values I'm not just talking about secular society, they are in our communities unfortunately, they've infiltrated everywhere. But we go to sleep in terms of those things, but our heart is awake, our heart is awake because we are waiting for the Beloved. Look at this wonderful text. I just think it's marvelous. "I hear my beloved knocking. Open to me my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one." This is what happened to Clare. "Though my head is covered with dew and my locks with the drops of night." So there he is the Beloved. In the context of the spiritual life we are speaking of God and God is longing to awaken in us the divine nature that is in us. It is the divine seeking the divine.

God is passionately in love with us because we are the beautiful manifestation of the divine within. God longs for that to come to life in us, to come to our consciousness. So God knocks to wake us up and the beloved responds, but I've taken off my tunic, I've might have put it on again, I've washed my feet, I might dirty them again. Now this is characteristic of what might happen to us when God calls. We just got our life nicely in order and we have a nice ministry going, and we're doing well. We're thinking we might get promoted, so whatever, I don't know what your lives are like but we've got our lives pretty much under control and it's nice, it works. We've managed to convince the Provincial to give us a car...but here comes the Divine One knocking, calling, awakening us and we don't want to get our feet dirty because it's a dirty business, it's a messy business, starting to realize that we have another dimension of consciousness to go into. And the text goes on, "my beloved thrusts his hand through the door and I trembled to the core of my being." This is this whole experience of the Divine awakening us and everything in us is aware that there is within us a capacity for immense love and it needs its light. So she says, "then I rose to open to my beloved." So she was ready for him, she decided to surrender to him. This is what happens to us. We say, OK God we're ready. And what happens. "I open to my beloved but he had turned his back and gone." That's what happens. Just when you give in he takes off. Now this is a deliberate experience that happens because God is not being deceiving or making things

difficult for us, God is trying to get us out of our beds, to get out of the established identity that we've established for ourselves, to move away from it all and to move into this very vulnerable, fragile, poor human being (that's how we feel this inner being to be) and to identify with that and to follow God into the night, into the darkness. What happens when she goes? She says, "I sought him but I did not find him. I called to him but he did not answer. The watchmen came upon me as they made their rounds in the city and they beat me up and they wounded me and they took away my cloak. They who guard the ramparts!" You know, this is part of the trouble, we have within ourselves these watchmen, a kind of respectable watchmen, who keep our image good. Unfortunately, sometimes they're out there as well, the people who guard the established way of doing things. If we go to our intellects, and to our personality gifts, and to our #6s or #3s (Enneagram numbers), whatever we've got, they are going to beat you up and they are going to be stripped naked. Why? Because they keep saying 'you're a #6 and you're a #3, and you're a this, and you're a that, and you fit into this and you fit into that.

Look, this Christ nature is way beyond any of these things! This is the Christ nature that Clare left home to seek, to give her whole heart to. To live from this is way beyond any of these constructs, psychological or whatever else these things are. They are useful, they're very useful. But they are not us. They are not our true being. Our true being is so immensely beautiful and we are called to be women of light who manifest this being to the world. If hidden, people don't see it, they don't know what it is but they experience it. They experience it in you. It's the Divine presence. If there's one thing this world needs it is men and women who can be the Divine presence. That's our privilege, that's our vocation, this is our call!

Religious are going through so much suffering today and all the big institutions are becoming unwieldy, we're getting old. We have so many issues, but I'm going to tell you something – God knows why this is happening even if we don't. Because God is calling us to our true vocation and our true vocation is to be women of light and that means that we are women who are light, who carry life lightly because we live this beautiful life. And if God is stripping all these things away, including our youth, so what! The older we get the brighter the light shines! In fact, in my experience I only see this radiant light coming from the old. Some of our own sisters show it and it's wonderful! So let us take heart.

Questions:

1. How do I/we engage with God, the "Lover" within?
2. How am I/we aware of the Divine within myself/ourselves?
3. How can I/we let go of the masks that I/we wear, and allow the light of the true self to burst forth?