

Briege O'Hare – Session Four, Clare Retreat, August of 2005, Stella Niagara

We need to look at Clare's understanding of Gospel poverty, and the Holy Spirit, and how these significant, primary elements influenced her life. We need to look at contemplation for Clare. Without looking at that, nothing else can happen for us. What kind of woman is Clare? I say IS because Clare is still very much around, very much with us. What kind of fire was in her that drove her? What kind of spirit is this woman? She is our spiritual mother in the Franciscan family. We've been born of Francis and Clare. We have inherited these characteristics ourselves.

We will now address what is known today as the "Clarian Question." For many years Franciscan scholars were preoccupied with what was known as the "Franciscan Question." As we know some of the early sources were somewhat adjusted to portray a particular image of Francis, a particular agenda that the Franciscan Order or the Church might have had. With the centenary of Clare we began to ask, "Who is the real Clare?" This is due in part because Clare described herself as "the little plant of Francis" and this was misinterpreted and led to misunderstandings of who she really is and what she meant by it.

There has been quite a bit of work done by many of the American Third Order women, women like Margaret Carney, Ingrid Peterson, and new material coming now from Ilia Delio who is writing not as a historian but as a theologian. Perhaps the most exciting and innovative work that is going on is from a young Italian woman who is causing many waves across the world of Franciscan scholarship. Her name is Maria Pia Alberzoni. She has done extensive research into Clare and the picture that is emerging, exciting, wonderful, and is exploding so much of the work of other persons about Clare because it's a very different Clare that we're discovering. Many Poor Clares in the Church are finding it very hard to accept. This work of Alberzoni is treated with respect because it is very scientifically researched. I'm going to give you some of the latest about Clare so that you are updated with the latest about Clare. I will try to be as accurate as possible as I relate Alberzoni's insights but I am not a scientist nor an historian so I will likely have it laced with a little Irish blarney!

What we were talking about this morning when Clare received from Francis the form of Life is only one aspect of it. "You have been made yourself a daughter of God. You have chosen to live in a new covenant." Now that happened in the year 1212; that is when Francis gave the rule to Clare. The style of life that Clare and her sisters were living at that time was more or less the same as that of the friars. There is even the possibility that some went out preaching like the friars. That is a debatable question in the moment and Alberzoni has not addressed it. There is some research going on now about the 'Minoresses', what we now know as the Clares.

Basically the Clare's lifestyle was the same. They went out begging for food, they lived a Gospel life together, living the life of the Spirit of the Lord. Everything that Francis taught his brothers. That was going fine for three years, up until 1215. Then Lateran IV happened. The bishops gathering in Rome at the Church of the Lateran for a Council, they had other concerns, one was about the Eucharist but they also had a concern about the women in the Church. (Nothing new in that, says you!) It was a worry because that was a growing development of women's movements. They were forming themselves into some type of religious congregations for want of a better word. There was a penitential movement, there was the Beguine movement. They were just forming themselves into groups and getting on with it and they were not asking for any permission. This was worrying the bishops! They felt they had to issue a decree (it settles a lot of things when you do that). The decree in Lateran IV said that all these women have to have an official rule of the Church which would be the Benedictine rule, Augustinian rule or Cistercian rule. That

decree went out in 1215 and Clare would have heard that. Clare just ignored that and got on with being a Franciscan. She understood herself as belonging to the Friars Minor and didn't see herself as one of these women who didn't have a rule. Francis actually didn't have a rule. She knew they were working on it so she didn't worry about it. She belonged to that.

He designed a word for these women where he designed a rule for them about the closing down of their senses. They were not allowed to speak ever, at any time, for any reason. Except, and this is a direct quote, "for someone upon whom is enjoined a teaching office which may not be exercised without speaking." "Even those who are sick in the infirmary may not speak to each other." He also said that they are not allowed to see anything. He ordered that the veil be designed to come down below their nose. The only thing they ever saw was their own feet! They weren't allowed to hear anything because there was nothing to hear – no one was talking!

The rule was very neo-platonic and Cardinal Hugolino believed that with this kind of rule their spirit would take off to God. This rule was sent to Clare and her sisters. Can you imagine how she would have reacted? When we think of the spiritual life that she and Francis shared, the gift of insight they received about the Gospel life and the Incarnation, God and Christ in everything that exists, and to be given this neo-platonic theology as something to live by, of course Clare had no intention to live by it. Clare was a wise lady and didn't just disobey. She did what every woman does when she wants to change a man's mind. She invited him to tea! This year was 1219 and he came and he stayed with Clare and her sisters. He stayed and could see what the lifestyle of Clare and her sisters was about. What she didn't expect was what was going to happen to Cardinal Hugolino. He fell in love with her. I used to get angry about this and then I went to the city of Ajani, the city where Clare was canonized. There's a portrait of Hugolino there – and he was a very handsome looking man! I will read to you a part of the letter he wrote to Clare after he left her and you decide if he was in love. I reckon he was. "My very dear Sister in Christ, from that very first hour when the necessity of returning here separated me from you holy conversation and tore me away from that joy of heavenly treasure, such a bitterness of heart, such an abundance of tears, and such an immensity of sorrow had overcome me that unless I find at the feet of Jesus the consolation of His usual kindness, I feel that I will always encounter such trials that will cause my spirit to melt away. And this is reasonable because just as an overwhelming sorrow ensued when the Lord was taken away from the disciples and nailed to the gallows of the cross, so I remain desolate by your absence." It goes on in that vein for quite some time. Clearly Clare knows that she had quite an extraordinary effect on him. She had a profound influence on him.

Alberzoni tells us that after this visit the idea of Clare using his rule got dropped and he didn't pursue it with her. He probably saw clearly for himself that she was living something very special, very extraordinary and that his rule did not fit it. This were an interesting development starts to happen. He's away back in Rome doing his work as a Cardinal and Clare is getting on with living the Franciscan life with her brothers and sisters. Hugolino is beginning to see that this rule he wrote for all these orders is pointing to something more than just a rule. He has another idea. His idea was that women's religious life in the world was a complete mess. Abbesses in Benedictine monasteries were getting out of hand. One example of many is from England, where the Benedictine abbess from Shaftesbury had more land and a bigger army than the King of England. The abbesses employed huge armies to protect their wealth. They were members of the House of Lords and they were all over influencing many, including the Church. Hugolino was worried about it, their wealth and their gadding about. It was the custom that if the beer in the local monastery wasn't good they all went down to the local pubs. He was very worried and has another idea. (This is where

Alberzoni's research is so helpful.) He decided that what he really needed to do was to create a new women's Order within the church. It would be the perfect model of poverty and the opposite of gadding about. It's what we call enclosure. He thought these were two principal means of reform – poverty and enclosure.

He decided to found an Order, but he had enough experience to know that if one is going to found an Order for women, one needs a holy foundress so that all the women can look up to her. Guess who he decided fitted the bill! The woman he was in love with – Clare. She was the perfect model of what he wanted because he had been profoundly impressed by her life of poverty. The enclosure piece wasn't so terrific, but he could fix that by making it a bit more strict. He met with Clare and asked her if she would agree to be the foundress of this new Order which was unnamed at this point. She said to him, (this is not Alberzoni, it is me. If she had been Irish this is what she would have said!) "You must be joking! Me a foundress for that? Will you (Get yourself on! I have joined Francis and the brothers in living something completely other. All this neo-platonic thing that you are doing (Clare would not have had these words, but this is what she meant) She didn't want anything to do with it. He did everything he could do to persuade her and she wouldn't agree. So she sent him off and she went on with being a Franciscan.

Guess what he did? And this is what Alberzoni has shed light on – and what has thrown a "cat among the chickens" among Poor Clares. Against Clare's wishes he called his new Order, the Order of Poor Ladies of San Damiano. He called his order after Clare's monastery even though she herself would have no part of it. Then he imposed upon these women his rule, his horrendous rule of life known as the Hugoline Rule. This has caused enormous confusion in historical research because when you are reading history and read about the Poor Ladies of San Damiano it seems we're reading about Clare and her sisters and we are not. We are reading about the Hugoline Order in which Clare had no part. Clare knew about it but ignored it. She was simply faithful to what the Spirit had given her and she lived the form of life that Francis had given her.

Hugolino was not content; he kept at Clare. He continued to insist that she join his Order and she continued to refuse. He went to Francis and told him that he'd have to make Clare into some kind of Benedictine or the like because the Church does not accept what she is doing because the rule is not formally recognized. Francis, persuaded by Hugolino went to Clare and told her she would need to be an abbess, in the line of this Benedictine reality. What am I going to do that for Clare said; I'm just the same as you are. This is the time she had her first row (conflict) with Francis. She disagreed with being an abbess, yes, but she disagreed with this Benedictine style of being an abbess. She wanted the freedom of the Franciscan life. Margaret Carney in her work puts it like this, Francis reasoned with Clare saying you have two options here. The Church is not going to change its mind. The Cardinal will not give up on this. You have to be either an abbess based in the Benedictine style of life or Cardinal Hugolino will appoint someone from outside of your community to be in charge of you. You'll be made to live it. We suspect that Francis just said that if I were you I would just say yes. And then do it your own way. So Clare went with that option. She accepted the role of abbess very, very reluctantly in order to protect the freedom of the community to live what they believed.

That went on for a little while and Pope Honorius died around the year 1227 and guess who got to be the Pope? Cardinal Hugolino! As soon as he got his new hat, he said, right, I've got her now! She has to obey me. I'll get her now to join my Order which was thriving and spreading all over Europe. As young sisters we were amazed at how the Poor Clares were spread all over Europe. They were not Poor Clares, they

were Hugolines! There were still only about three monasteries at the time, the one where Clare's sister Agnes was in Florence, and one possibly in Perugia, and a third nearby. All the rest were Hugoline. They were Poor Ladies of San Damiano; that was their title. So as soon as Hugolino became Pope he headed off to Assisi. He went to see Clare and put it before her – I want you to join my Order, I want you to be officially named the foundress. Hugolino knew it was much different from what Clare did and desired and that poverty was significant for Clare and that he had agreed to cancel out the poverty piece. The reason he had to do that was that to live Franciscan poverty you cannot be locked out. You need to be able to connect with the people on whose goodness you depend. He discovered that this strict enclosure which he wanted was incompatible with poverty. He had eliminated the poverty and made sure that every monastery had so much land and income in the Benedictine model. He was Pope, Hugolino said and I can dispense you from that so don't be worrying about it. I just need you to join my Order.

What was Clare to do; this was the Pope talking to her. Do you know what she said to him? When he said that he could dispense her from poverty she said, "Your Holiness, I don't want to be dispensed from living the Gospel of my Lord Jesus Christ." What she was saying to him in essence was that your project for women's religious life is not about living the Gospel. Whatever it is, it's anti-Gospel because it was anti-human, it was anti-incarnational. So Clare refused him there and then. Now this is extraordinary. Nobody said no to the Pope. The Pope was a very powerful man in those days, politically and religiously. Yet she refused.

Alberzoni says that there is a certain vagueness around this episode in that it would appear that he insisted that she be a member of his Order, that she be one of the Poor Ladies of San Damiano. It would appear that the discussion was quite hearted and went on for a long time. She had to get some kind of deal; that was the only way she could get around it. So the deal she got we now know was the "Privilege of Poverty." She would accept belonging to his Order with a broken heart because she was a Franciscan. Francis was dead and canonized; she belonged to that Order with its approved rule. She had to give all that up. So she would accept that only on the condition that she could continue to live Gospel poverty and that he write it on paper and sign it with his own hand. Apparently the Pope did sign and that is what we now have, "The Privilege of Poverty." It was Clare's only way to ensure the right to be poor and to live the Franciscan life. However, Clare was not able to stay with it. After a short time she disowned the title of "Poor Ladies of San Damiano." We notice it in the introduction to her letters, the way she introduces herself. It is very revealing.

In the first letter to Agnes of Prague she introduces herself as Clare, an unworthy servant of Jesus Christ, and a useless servant of the enclosed Ladies of the monastery of San Damiano. Clare had to join his Order in 1228 and this was in 1234.

In her second letter she introduces herself as Clare, the useless and unworthy servant of the Poor Ladies. She drops the San Damiano piece and I believe it was because she just could not bear associating with that other spirituality of the Poor Ladies of San Damiano.

When it comes to her third letter, she introduces herself as Clare, the most lowly and unworthy handmaid of Christ and servant of the Poor Ladies. Nothing Else. She is refusing to own the San Damiano title.

In her last letter, she goes back to calling herself, Clare, unworthy servant of Christ and useless handmaid of His handmaidens in the monastery of San Damiano of Assisi. Clare had decided that she was not going to accept this imposition of the Holy See. Gradually, as the years passed, she gradually began to look for a way out of it. Eventually, in about the year 1247 Gregory IX died and she seized the moment and wrote immediately to the new Pope, Innocent IV. She asked that she please be recognized as a Franciscan in the Church and officially have allotted to her and her Sisters the Rule of St. Francis. When he received that letter from Clare, he would not have known all the background. Knowing the Rule of Benedict, Augustine and so on, they were all saints, so he granted her request. He granted the Rule of Francis as her rule.

The Pope wrote, "Along with this Rule of Life which I hereby give you, and it was worse than what Hugolino had given her, she was given the Rule of Francis, but not allowed to be a Franciscan. It no way recognized the privilege of poverty that she had from Gregory. She was in a worse state now. It was a constant struggle in her life, she was getting on in years and she was quite sick. She gathered the sisters together and read this rule to them. They were just appalled. They said they just could not do that because the whole spirituality was so other. Clare saw only one option, that they write their own rule, their own form of life. So she did, basing it on the Rule of Francis. She took large pieces from the Rule of Francis not what we now call the Rule of Clare, but she called it the Form of Life. As far as she was concerned her Rule was the Rule of Francis.

The problem was, how is she going to get it approved? When you study Clare's Rule, her favorite word was "except!" She knew she was required canonically to state certain things, so she stated them. She knew she had to speak about enclosure. For example, "The sisters shall keep enclosure for the whole of their lives and never leave the monastery at any time." That was in Hugolino's Rule, in Innocent IV's Rule, so she knew that it had to be there. "Except they may leave for any useful, reasonable, obvious or approved purpose." Clare constantly built this in. She tried to provide within her Rule the Franciscan way of relationship. For Hugolino silence was to be kept at all times and it should never be permitted for one to speak to another or another to speak to her. Clare says, and this is important because it gives a sense of the whole value that relationship is to Clare, "Let the Sisters keep silence from compline until terce (from when you go to bed until breakfast). Clare adds, "except those who are outside the monastery at that time." She knows that silence is important. "Let them also continually keep silence in the church, in the dormitory, and in the refectory but only when they are eating." "They may speak discreetly at all time, however, but especially in the infirmary for the recreation of the Sisters." "Nevertheless, they can communicate always and everywhere whenever it is necessary."

How is she going to get this approved? Clare was not simply being casual; it's because she's being Franciscan! Relationship matters, communicating, talking, cheering each other up, relating, loving each other – not going around with this silent stuff. Relationship matters, it is precious to her to preserve this truly incarnational way of being. But how is she going to get it approved?

Clare knew that when it got to Rome some canon lawyer would scratch, scratch, scratch out parts of what she had written. Clare did what she always did. She prayed. Someone came to the door with a message from the monastery in Bastia where Clare first went when she left home. The message was from a Benedictine sister in that monastery who was praying when she had a vision and a voice spoke to her saying, "Go and tell the Lady Clare that she shall not die until the Lord and His disciples come to visit her." Clare was close to death at this point. She kept the rule, she had not yet sent it to Rome. Clare translated it as 'the Pope and his entourage'. So Clare said to the sisters, if Mohammad cannot go to the mountain,

the mountain must come to Mohammed. We wait our moment. And he did come. He came around the 9th or 10th of August in the year 1253. Because of Clare's reputation for holiness he went to visit her. He, Innocent IV had dealings with Clare but had never met her. When he had put his Rule of Life out there she had written to him and told him that she was not going to follow it. So he knew her to be a fairly strong-willed woman. He went to visit her and something happened to him. This is Margaret Carney's reading of it. "Innocent IV went to the bed where Clare was dying and he looked at this saintly woman and he did what anyone would do in those circumstances. He said, "Lady Clare is there anything I can do for you?" Clare put her hand under the bed and said, "There is this Rule, Holy Father. Would you approve it?" "What is it?" he asks, his being the first time being confronted with this. "It's the form of life we've written for our way of life as Franciscan women." He responded saying he would take it away and look at it. He was staying in Assisi overnight and word came to him that Clare was dying and may not last until the next day. He remembered the document and got it out and read it. He had been profoundly affected by this meeting with Clare; she was an extraordinary saint. He wrote in his own hand in the corner of the document which was written by Clare and her sisters, "For reasons best known to myself I hereby approve this Form of Life." Whatever happened to him, he knew he had to approve it. He attached to it the Papal seal, rolled it up, gave it to a friar or someone to take it straight away to Clare.

Clare was dying, the sisters were gathered around the bed and the friar comes with the document that Clare immediately recognized since she had so often rolled it up after reviewing it and working on it; she recognized the seal. We are told that Clare reached for it, took it into her hands and kissed it many times out of devotion. Here, after the nearly 40 years she struggled with the authority of Mother Church to be recognized as a Franciscan woman. Here at last was the Form of Life for Franciscan Women approved by the Church. That was on the evening of the 10th of August. The following morning, on the 11th of August the sisters saw Our Lady appear with a whole entourage of beautiful women who came to her bedside and covered her with a glorious kind of cloth and Clare's beautiful soul went accompanied by Our Lady and the beautiful women into heaven.

The sisters were left with this heritage of this beautiful Way of Life secured for them by a whole lifetime of perseverance and fidelity to the gift of the Spirit given to her when she was seventeen years old! What a wonderful story.

The sad news is that two years after her death she was canonized by Alexander IV as the foundress of the Order of the Poor Ladies of San Damiano. The only people who were not in that Order were her own community! They were not in it. At some point they had withdrawn from that Order; we don't quite know when. Clare's body was taken up to Assisi to the chapel of St. George. Miracles were happening up there, the sisters were down at San Damiano. The Mother was up there healing the city. The sisters decided they wanted to be where their Mother was so they asked the friars if they would change places which they eventually did. They are still there today in what is known as the Basilica of Santa Chiara.

There was great adulation about Clare and her miracles and this Order that she founded, this Hugoline Order. There were never more than four or five places that were actually Clare's own foundations. The sisters were the only ones at this point who were not in it. Everybody else seemed to be in it. Eventually they went to the Holy Father and they said we are feeling a bit left out because it was our holy Mother Clare, who founded this Order and we are not in it. Everybody is coming to us thinking we are rich. The Pope asked them if they wanted to join it. They said that it looks like we will have to. The Pope said, on one condition and that is that you give up the Rule of Clare and take the Hugoline Rule. You must give up

the Privilege of Poverty and get property and land that you can live off so that you stay strictly enclosed. The poor women must have felt 'if you can't beat them, join them'. And so they agreed. I don't know how our holy Mother felt about that but they agreed. What they did to safeguard her Rule was to sew it into her habit, they went to her tomb and placed it in there and accepted this Hugoline Rule as their way of life.

For 700 years, the Poor Clare's have been living as Hugoline's. This is what Alberzoni's work has blown wide open as she exposed all this. It was only in Vatican II, in our lifetime, that Poor Clare's were given back the Rule of Clare for the first time since 1263. Some Poor Clares won't accept that because they say it's too lenient; it's not strict enough for their life style. The Poor Clares have a great deal to sort out; we need you to pray for us.

Clare's spirit has prevailed. The institutional church's machination comes to nothing because as Margaret Carney so rightly says, her time has finally come. And the Franciscan of the world are owning her as their spiritual mother. The spirit is moving among us all because she is the one who most faithfully expressed and was faithful to the charism we identify as the charism of Francis. So let us hold this woman in great honor and in thanksgiving. I know for sure she is with us all and she wants us to be faithful to that spirit to which she was faithful.

I suggest that we reflect on the words from one of Clare's favorite scripture texts. She was very influenced by 2 Corinthians. The thing that most entranced her in 2 Corinthians is that section where Paul speaks about 'we are the new creation, new creatures in Christ, we have our own unveiled faces and that we grow brighter and brighter until we change into the image of God.' Clare quotes it in her third letter about contemplation. "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." It is this letter of Corinthians that inspired her about what it is that we are in the process of transformation into the Divine.

CD Song: "We Grow Brighter"

Questions:

1. How can I/we be open to receive the same fire of the Spirit to be faithful to all that God asks of me/us in our daily lives?
2. Who/What is the focus that gives me/us the strength to be faithful and gives me/us life?
3. What are some strengths and challenges facing me/us in my/our lives? To whom do I/we go to face them - to find peace, perseverance, and to be transformed?