

Clare: Abbess and Servant *Elizabeth CSF*

Opposite the entrance to the monastery of San Damiano on the lower slopes of Assisi's hill is a bronze statue of St Clare, holding up a monstrance. A strong patrician face looks out over the plain; and her attitude of command, even defiance, was reputedly sufficient to halt the advancing Saracen marauders, sending them into retreat and confusion. A model for the authority of an Abbess?



Clare's way was different: she is recognised as a leader rather than as authoritarian. In her, authority, as its root implies, is creative and nourishing, authenticating herself and others.

Leadership is a God-given charism, enabling others to respond and follow in a relationship of mutual trust, listening and receiving from each other.

For each of us the influences we experience and the choices we make from a young age, forge our character. Clare's mother, a noble lady, ran a household of servants and had several sons and daughters, of whom Clare was the eldest. Influential in the city, Ortolana gathered others who visited the sick and dispensed charity in the neighbourhood. Clare would have absorbed and learnt from her mother's role, unconsciously developing her own strengths.

With the combined example of a mother who went on pilgrimages when such ventures were risky, and of Francis as he found his way, it is not surprising that Clare should have set out on her own difficult path. Her way of complete poverty involved great courage and perseverance especially in the face of strong opposition from her family, and of the Church's view that such a life was too severe for a woman. But initial trials of excessive fasting and mortification led Clare to recommend "reasonable" sacrifice.

Her first little group had no official leader for three years. They made decisions together, recognised mutual needs, responsibilities and tensions between individual and community. So they began to forge appropriate structures. Much of this becomes clear from Clare's Rule.

At the time, any of the approved Rules, of Benedict, Augustine, Basil or Pachomius, might be adopted by a new community. But none would allow for the possibility of absolute poverty which Clare felt essential, nor provide for the relationship of her group to the friars. Nor did Clare look for the honour and status often seen in Benedictine leadership, influential, wealthy, allowing personal servants and separate quarters.

Monasteries of women were often founded by rich and influential families, as places where unmarried daughters could safely be placed. Without vocation, these women had to live by one of the known rules and were subject to ecclesiastical authority, with an Abbess appointed by the family or the Church. A class system inevitably resulted with servants doing the manual work of the

monastery. Clare soon left the Benedictine house, her first lodging, and spent some months with a group, possibly Beguines, living a poor and penitential life with no named leader.

Their example inspired her, as did that of Francis who received men from all strands of society, requiring only that property or money should be given away, so that mutual dependence and brotherhood were engendered. Clare's way was not quite as either, and the group which started at San Damiano had to make its own life.

Clare did not wish to be Abbess, but Francis and the Bishop of Assisi laid it on her as obedience, knowing that an approved Rule and an Abbess were essential for the Church's approval. Clare accepted this and grew into the situation through service to the community. With no blueprint, the little group learned through trial and error. Her Rule, later, makes clear that the relationship of the sisters with the friars was to be for sacramental provision and spiritual help, a bond of love in no way impinging on their own form of government.

Three words - sister, mother, servant - exemplify, in her Rule, her attitude to the role of Abbess. The relationship of a sister echoed the attitude of the Lord; she was equal with the others, one among them and not separate "in the common life, especially in whatever pertains to the Church, the dormitory, infirmary, clothing."

As mother she was to be "committed to the service and welfare of the Sisters" in justice, charity and compassion. In fact, "all should treat others as they would wish to be treated". The Abbess would have no privilege, and be there for all "lest despair overcome the weak." For "if a mother love and cherish her child according to the flesh, how much more lovingly must not a Sister love and nourish her Sister according to the Spirit".

Clare wanted the Sisters to "manifest their needs with confidence". Even poverty was to be observed with respect for individual need; the sick, especially, should have extra care. She saw status, wealth and property as fostering the abuse of power, so insisted that the Abbess must profess and "maintain the form of poverty to which they are promised". She was to be chosen by common consent and might be removed from office if incapable or incompetent.

Decisions, especially in matters incurring debt, were to be made by the group: all must be consulted "for the Lord often reveals to the least what is best to be done". Work was shared and a weekly chapter met to discuss "whatever pertains to the welfare and good of the monastery". This included the acceptance of new members. "If by divine inspiration anyone should come to us desiring to embrace this form of life, the Abbess must seek the consent of all the Sisters". After all, they would have to live together with all who came.

Clare acknowledged weakness and failure at the regular meeting where all "must confess their common and public offences and negligences". Correction

was to be without anger. No command must be "against their soul and the form of our profession".

As servant she followed the example of Christ, wanting to serve and if necessary to suffer for them. The Abbess, in humility, was to allow the sisters to expect and demand service from her. She wanted to be on such terms of relationship with them "that they may speak and act with her as mistresses with their servant; for thus it ought to be, that the Abbess be the servant of all the sisters".

She hoped to lead by example "of virtue and holy behaviour" so that the sisters would "obey more out of love than fear". This would be "according to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ". Clare's whole following of the Lord was a form of her own obedience, taking the meaning of that word seriously, as literally 'ob audire' -- 'out of listening'. *f*

Elizabeth has been a member of the Community of St Francis for 51 years; she is ordained and now lives in Stepney.