

In Touch with a Living Tradition

Gillian Clare OSC



At Christmas 1984 I received an unexpected gift: an invitation to share a session in Brussels on the writings of Clare. There were then no opportunities in this country for Franciscan studies. There had been one session on Franciscan sources at the Poor Clare monastery in Darlington in 1977, and that had been all. Since the early 1960s, however, we had been corresponding with Poor Clare monasteries abroad as we were the obvious opportunity for any Poor Clares who felt encouraged by Vatican II to be ecumenical. We had also had very friendly contacts with the Poor Clares in this country, who invited us to meetings as soon as they formed their Association. This invitation seemed an opportunity not to be missed. It proved deeply rewarding, and I was able to share later sessions on Franciscan writings with sisters from Belgium, France and Africa.

The people involved in the first session had been responsible for the recent French/Latin edition of the writings of Clare. This had pointed out that Clare had been the first woman to write a religious rule for women. Earlier ones had been written by men. As our earliest sisters had written their own rule, inspired by that of Clare, this had obvious resonances for us. We had never tried to copy exactly the Poor Clare pattern as then understood. Anglican communities which were inspired by traditions in the Roman Catholic Church had frequently adopted the original texts as a basis for their practice. As one recent writer on the Desert Fathers has pointed out, the rule provides the ideal. Pachomius wrote a rule and that is all we have, but where another rule (that of the White Monastery) is available with supplementary letters which reveal the practice of that rule, we have a much more complete picture (of fallibility). During the twenty years or so between Vatican II and my first visit to Belgium the Poor Clares throughout the world had been working on revising their Constitutions which interpret the Rule in the present day. Much had changed in their practice. We discovered that they could recognise our Rule as very close to their current practice and very close in spirit. We had built a chapel and parlour in 1960. When Brother David mentioned the question of the grille to Sr Gwenda Mary, she said that we would have grilles when the friars had the tonsure. She said that his hand went up to his thick dark hair and she heard no more of grilles. A community of Poor Clares in Belgium had to build a new chapel at the same time, and found it necessary to incorporate grilles which were difficult to remove a few years later. We were fortunate in our liberty and in our timing!

Over the years I have come to believe that our experience has been surprisingly close to that of Clare and her first sisters. We have been small, close to the other parts of the Franciscan family, and, if poverty is defined as dependence on God, we have been poor. The precarious nature of our life was brought home to some of the sisters on the continent when I was asked to speak about our experience at an Assembly of contemplative communities in Strasbourg. When I pointed out that if one of their houses had to close, there was always another house of the same Order which could receive the

remaining sisters, but that if we reached such a point there was no other house to take us in, it clearly made an impression. Clare's own precarious situation can be seen in the intensity of her response to Agnes of Prague. It must have been an immense comfort to have her cause taken up by someone in such a position. No wonder she describes Agnes as 'half of her own soul'.

Clare said that the Office was to be said according to the custom of the Friars Minor. In recent years with the production of the Daily Office SSF we have found it appropriate to use that to a considerable extent (though we also still use the equivalent of the Office of Readings). Once again our history has echoed that of the early Franciscans who found a need for a breviary rather than the large volumes of the monastic office. The success of the Daily Office SSF has contributed something to Anglican liturgical development, and we have shared in that.

In 1994 I was able to share a session at UNESCO in Paris for the end of the Clare's eighth centenary year. I was lucky enough to be able to stay with the Poor Clares near UNESCO and to share the celebration at Notre Dame on the Sunday with many Poor Clares from various parts of France, Africa, and Canada. It was a unique experience, but even more essential have been our friendships with the Poor Clares in this country. They generously joined with us in celebrating the golden jubilee of this community during the meeting of the Assembly in 2000. We continue to share with them any gatherings that come along and were particularly glad to be able to welcome one of three Chapters of Mats for sisters of the Association last year. The sisters met at our guest house but overflowed into the convent which was happy for us all. There are also the yearly Poor Clare Formation courses at Arkley which include other Franciscans as opportunity offers, and other monastic courses. Recently we have appreciated the TV presentation of the life by the sisters at Arundel.

Since our early beginnings the sharing of life and resources with other parts of the Franciscan family has become much more evident. Again we echo Clare's links with the other Franciscans of her time. Apart from ecumenical contacts we have been able to welcome the First Order and the Third Order to our guest house since we acquired it in 1965, and we have been glad to have as chaplains first the brothers of the First Order, then sisters of the First Order, and now members of the Third Order who kindly help us on occasion. We have also done an increasing amount of printing for the other Orders since we started the printing house in 1964. We have taken an increasing part in some of the annual Chapters and in the General Chapters of the First and Third Orders. We are always glad to welcome a First Order Chapter to the guest house, especially as it gives us a chance to meet the members informally, if briefly.

For a religion concerned with incarnation nothing is as valuable as the personal contacts which embody the shared spirit, and lead us on together. *f*

Sister Gillian Clare was a member of the Community of St Clare at Freeland from 1960 until her death in November 2006.