

**Putting Clare into Context:
Clare and the Medieval Pattern of Holiness for Women
Sister Francisca OSC**



How did Clare react to the theological understandings of women in her time? How did the Church and Society think women should behave; and what was the ideal of holiness set before them?

Early Christian thought, influenced by ancient Greek philosophy, was misogynist and anti-feminist. Women were thought defective at all levels. Aristotle, Socrates, Pythagoras, in turn, considered women 'a deformity', 'a source of evil' and 'created by an evil principle'. However, the Christian ideal showed a high view of the individual, and Jesus' attitude to women was atypical of his time; while the importance of Mary in devotion and theology gave women greater respect.

Even so, the patriarchal mentality contributed to an ambivalence, where women were seen as evil and temptress on one hand, while on the other praised as Judith, Ruth or Esther for the dubious exercise of their sexual attraction. Here were two inextricably entangled strands: one seeing women as man's complement and helpmate, equal heir to grace and salvation; the other a perpetual source of temptation and sin, subject to man as her master and lord.

In New Testament times women, initially, were active in mission and other work, as Paul depicts; but some became involved with heretical sects, for example Montanists and Gnostic groups, where they baptised and celebrated the Eucharist. In reaction, as the Sacraments became more formalised and structures more hierarchic, orthodox women were barred from such office and counselled to remain in their traditional roles as wife and mother. The maternal role was crucial, "She will be saved by childbearing" (1 Tim. 2: 10). With Mary as the unattainable model, women were to imitate her meekness, obedience and humility, all of which encouraged their repression and total subjection to father or husband.

As related by Athanasius, Ambrose and Jerome, women who chose a life of virginity had to dress in black, have their hair cropped and covered by a black veil at their consecration by the bishop; and eat only one meal a day of bread and vegetables. They were to study the scriptures, rise during the night to pray, and gather together to chant the psalms at the traditional hours. The model for holiness was male; and sanctity was attained only through acquiring masculine virtues. The Church Fathers thought that virgins living an ascetic life could transcend their female sexuality and be transformed spiritually into

men; so female saints like St. Brigid and St. Moninna are described as having masculine souls. What then was Clare's response to all this?

By contrast Clare, a devout girl, was initially given to much fasting and penance but modified her asceticism and counselled others to be prudent. Her spirituality was intensely feminine; and her letters included nuptial, motherhood and nurturing imagery, and symbols of bridal beauty and creativity, all transcending the contemporary pattern. Clare delighted in her womanhood.

Prayer, for Clare, meant essentially the Divine Office. We find from her letters that she was familiar with scripture and had a great love for the Office. So how did she fit with the history of the Liturgy of the Hours and especially as it affected Francis and his brothers? Its importance for her and her knowledge of the liturgical world of her day are expressed in her Rule: "they may have breviaries"; and in her wish that the sisters should say the Office "after the manner of the Friars".

In the early Church the Divine Office was the prayer of all the faithful, not just of 'professionals' - priests, monks and nuns. Beyond question, the earliest Christians took with utmost seriousness the New Testament command to "pray without ceasing", and the 'Didache' or 'The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles' (c.50 AD) witnesses to the custom of praying the 'Our Father' three times daily when Christians met together. In time a vital principle of the Liturgy of the Hours came about, namely, to pray at the same time as others when separated physically. Acts 2 and other texts testify that the Christian community prayed together, taking over and adapting synagogue usage.

Later Tertullian and Hippolytus wrote of 'prescribed prayer', meaning prayer at morning and evening and the hours of Christ's passion, the third, sixth and ninth hours. These consisted of psalms, canticles and hymns, and were the common hours that marked the intervals of the day.

After the Peace of Constantine (312 AD), Christians could meet and pray together with public celebration and in parochial churches. Augustine relates how his mother went twice a day to church. The Cathedral and Peoples' Offices were colourful and lively, with candles and incense, the bishop in vestments and much singing. In contrast, monastic prayer at the time, as described by John Cassian, consisted of recitation of psalms at dawn and dusk, the principal object being to recite the whole psalter consecutively. Concentration on the words of psalms and readings was most important and quite unlike the ceremonial of the Cathedral Office.

In the sixth century, with Benedict, the Office was all-important; and in the centuries following, more hymns, anthems and devotions were added, resulting in seven hours by day and one at night as the norm for monasteries, much less being used by the Church at large. So much was added that as many as fifteen books might be needed, a glorious and impressive cult, seen as sharing in the splendour of the worship of heaven. Offices for different

occasions were arranged, and in some choirs a perpetual rota organised for chanting the Office day and night.

Clearly this was not for Francis and itinerant brothers. Major simplification was necessary all round, resulting eventually, after the Gregorian reforms of the eleventh century, in a 'breviary', still quite a large book. This was used by Innocent III and later taken all through Europe by the Friars. Francis' own breviary, still preserved in Assisi, is a true liturgical treasure. It is the most ancient witness to Innocent's reformed liturgy, and perhaps the oldest portable breviary containing rubrics. Francis also added his own extra 'little offices' and devotions.

The situation for Clare and her sisters was basically different from that of the friars, since they had 'a place', a small monastery with church and choir. The more stable life and the education of some of the Poor Ladies meant that the Divine Office came more naturally to them than to the brothers. However, Clare, like Francis, avoided liturgical over-load. While loving and appreciating the place of the Divine Office in daily life, she did not opt for lengthy and complex devotions which did not fit her vision of poverty and simplicity. Clare of Assisi, responding to God's call, remodelled religious life for women and adapted its worship, at every level retaining self-hood and femininity for herself and others. *f*

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