

The One Thing Necessary - What is it?

"But because one thing is necessary, I bear witness to that one thing."

(St Clare)

Briege O'Hare OSC



It is a brave woman indeed who would take her stand on one side, contrary to the mind of Rome, and on the other side, contrary to the prevailing view of so many of her peers. What makes the drama all the more interesting is the fact that the protagonists involved are no ordinary people. This is the stuff of great theatre.

On one side we have Gregory IX, a 13th Century Pope and one of the most powerful figures in the known world. On the other we have Clare of Assisi, daughter of the aristocratic Favorone family. The issue of conflict is brought to a head in the person of a royal princess, Agnes of Prague, daughter of King Premysl Ottokar I of Bohemia: Agnes, who sometime previously had heard Franciscan friars preach in Prague, was so profoundly affected that she knew she was called to leave her royal household and join the Franciscan Order. The friars doubtless told her of Clare and so Agnes wrote to the Holy See for permission to establish a monastery of Poor Ladies in Prague. The monastery was established in 1234. Within a short period of about a year, the conflict erupted.

The issue was about poverty. For Gregory, it had proved an unworkable ideal, which militated against his vision for women's religious life. For a number of years he had been pursuing an agenda of reform in women's religious life and to this end he wrote a Rule, which was to serve this reform. His model, which was generic for all women religious, emphasised strict enclosure, separation from the world and non-communication both within and outside the monastery. This is what he sent to Agnes of Prague as the official Rule for her new monastery. Clare disagreed. For Clare, poverty was not an ideal. It was the heart and essence of the gospel. It was the gateway into the freedom and joy of experiencing oneself as Jesus did, as the beloved one of God. It was, to use Clare's own words, to be "caught up in the embrace" of God. It is this conflict between Clare's reading of the gospel and the mind of Gregory IX, which caused Clare to write what we know as her second letter to Agnes. It was probably written sometime in 1235.

Agnes was in crisis. She knew where her heart was. It was with the energy and beauty of the gospel vision of Francis and Clare. But her dilemma is not unfamiliar to so many of us in today's church. Where is her obedience? Is it to the Holy See? Is she just following her own will in her attraction to what she knows of Clare and her sisters? Gregory wanted Agnes to ensure financial

security for her monastery and he had made it clear that failure to provide for this would be irresponsible on Agnes's part. Agnes had built a Hospice beside the monastery and Gregory wanted the income from this to be transferred directly to the monastery for the support of the sisters and the maintenance of the monastery. Isn't this a highly sensible arrangement? Wouldn't freedom from financial worry make a life of prayer all the more serene and untroubled? And would it not also ensure that the sisters need not "trouble" people by depending on them for their material needs? Such dependence might cause all sorts of interactions with the local people that might lead to failures in silence, recollection, enclosure, and so on.

Clare's views on gospel poverty were an irritant to Gregory. Only six years previously, he had taken the trouble to visit Clare at San Damiano to persuade her to give up her convictions. He offered to make provision for her monastery so that Clare and her sisters could live according to his model of religious life. "If you have fear for your vow", he said, "I absolve you from it". "Holy Father", she said, "I will never in any way wish to be absolved from the following of Christ." Notice her language. The Pope was proposing his preferred version of religious life but Clare in effect told him that his project was anti-gospel! She did not want to be dispensed from "following Christ".

So what have we here? What is the heart of the issue? Clare has no doubt in her mind what it is. It is about obedience to the Holy Spirit. It is about knowing that one's whole life is led "...by the Spirit of the Lord and the Spirit's holy manner of working" (Rule of Clare 10). This was something that both she and Francis often repeated. In her second letter to Agnes, Clare sets out her conviction very clearly. With amazing certainty she declares, "One thing is necessary and I bear witness to that one thing." (Clare's Second Letter to Agnes, verse 9 i.e. 2LAg 9) What is this one thing? Clare's answer comes as a surprise to the reader. She says, "Be conscious of your beginning." What does she mean? The clue is in what she says previous to this statement, "Like another Rachel, remember and be conscious...." Rachel, whose very name means, "see your beginning", was to the medieval mind the model of the truly contemplative woman, the one who "sees". For Clare it's all about seeing, remembering, and being conscious. Only the contemplative mind can "see". In the context of Agnes's dilemma, Clare advises her to see with the eyes of the spirit, to re-connect with the original moment of discovery of one's spiritual calling. Not in the sense of a role within the Church but in the reality of the discovery of one's deepest spiritual identity; to remember this; to be conscious of this, "not believing anything, not agreeing with anything that would dissuade you from this or that would place a stumbling block in your way."(2LAg 14)

Clare does not tell Agnes what decision to make about the exterior form of her monastic life. She points Agnes to that Kairos moment, that moment of original seeing, that moment of connection with the divine essence within, that moment of consciousness of being 100% alive in God and she says, live a form of life which makes this inner reality your normal reality. For Clare, as for Francis, only highest poverty opens the way to such an experience. In this is the essential genius of the mystical insight of Francis and Clare. All the great

contemplatives and mystics tell us that we can experience total aliveness in God during contemplation and this is true. However, what Clare is telling us is that if we want to experience our everyday life as lived from our deepest spiritual identity, then highest poverty is the way. "O holy poverty, God promises the Kingdom of Heaven to those who possess and desire you." (1LAg 16) With a subtle reference to Pope Gregory's project, Clare says to Agnes,

"If anyone would tell you something else, or suggest something that would seem contrary to your divine vocation, even though you must respect him, do not obey his counsel."

Then in her gift for getting to the heart of the matter in simple language, Clare adds, "But as a poor virgin, embrace the poor Christ." (2LAg 17,18) *f*

Briege O'Hare is a Poor Clare. Her monastery is in Dundalk, Ireland where she and her sisters live a contemplative life inspired by the Rule of Clare and St. Francis' Rule for Hermitages. The architecture of the monastery is based on the celtic monastic model.