

Clare the Pilgrim

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In a recent article in the newsletter of the Third Order Regular, Nancy Celaschi OSF makes the interesting point that, in the Franciscan sources, most of the early references to being strangers and pilgrims do not refer to aspects of the itinerant life, but to the way the brothers dwell in their abodes. That rather unexpected insight leads us to wonder how Clare, permanently in her abode, might have expressed that same pilgrimage imperative, and in this article I would like to reflect a little on some aspects of this.

When we look at Clare's flight from home on that Palm Sunday evening, it is quite clear that the whole adventure was carefully orchestrated and planned. Some details that we might consider important were left out - like where she was to go after joining the friars - but all the elements that mattered to her were present. It was the beginning of Holy Week. She had shared in the triumph of Palm Sunday by going to the Cathedral for Mass in all her finery, her red dress, her temporal glory. She gave the world a bill of divorce (Legend of Clare 8). That night she took a further step, leaving home to go 'outside the camp' of Assisi (Hebrews 13) and share the degradation of Christ. Degradation means down-grading which she was certainly doing, shifting from the top of the pile (nobilitas) to the bottom (vilitas) where people had no rights, no resources, no power, no clout - all things she was used to having in abundance. It is noteworthy that Clare often speaks of Christ's 'downgrading' from the Trinity to the impoverishment of our humanity. This suggests that although it was wholeheartedly chosen, it was not always easy but demanded constant attention and commitment on her part. Yet at the end of her life she asserted that nothing had been 'bothersome', no penance too severe, no weakness hard (LegCl 44). This only makes credible psychological sense within the frame of her own advice to Agnes in the four letters. There we see her balancing the poverty of Christ's humanity against his centrality in the glory of the Kingdom (eg 1Ag 15-24; 2Ag 5-7; 3Ag 12-14; 4Ag 15-23).

It is clear that this was a key concept for her and that it set, so to speak, the two extremes of Christ's archetypal journey through our humanity, and therefore of her own journey since this down-grading journey of Christ's is the pattern for any Christian: 'I came from the Father and have come into the world, now I leave the world to go to the Father.' (John 16.28)

So Clare, too, left the world to go to the Father. Her starting point was different from Christ's but her journey took her through a parallel self-emptying or kenosis. Her map was her option to have and desire nothing but God. This made her into a true pilgrim, travelling from all (nobilitas) to nothing (vilitas) in order finally to enter the All. Mendicancy for Clare was an articulation of trust, an entry into the heart of paradox where she could travel infinite spaces while staying in the one place of San Damiano. With this, the unknown, the unstable and the risky formed a firm and God-filled foundation for her life. They were transformed into the country across which her pilgrim heart would journey towards the One who would 'kiss her with the happiest kiss of his mouth' (4Ag 32) - and we recall here Bonaventure's comment in a sermon on St John, that this kiss between God and humanity is Christ himself. This journey for Clare was not simply her personal pilgrimage, but is profoundly integrative because it is the journey of all humanity and even, possibly, the journey of all creation as it travels to Teilhard's Omega point of Christ. Certainly we see that for Clare, the very process of entering so fully into this pilgrimage of the heart to God brought about the paradoxical effect that she was, like Adam and Eve, made completely at home wherever she might be. About Clare, as about Adam and Eve in the beginning, the Lady Poverty could say: '. . .having nothing of their own, their only concern was for God' (Sacrum Commercium 25).

Content to be pilgrims and strangers, they discovered that this made them guests of the Most High: 'The Lord loves the stranger, providing him with food and clothing' (Dt 10.18).

In Chapters 6-10 of her Rule Clare deals with some of the practical implications of this, expressed in terms of *sine proprio* (without owning anything), and she explores it into the dry estuaries of material want and physical illness. As always, the early verses set the vision and the details come later: 'Let the sisters appropriate nothing as their own, neither a house nor a place nor any other thing. And like pilgrims and strangers in this world, serving the Lord in poverty and humility, let them send for alms with confidence' (Rule of Clare 8).

This, then, is the vision, that Friar Christ, the Lord of glory, became our brother and entered into extremes of loss in order to reveal to us the wholly different value system of the Wholly Other, God. In his book *Living in the End Times*, James Alison, a modern theologian, says some interesting things about Scripture as a progressive revelation of the innocence of the victim, a revelation culminating in the death of Christ, the wholly Innocent One where God is revealed as definitively on the side of the victim. I think Clare, who imitated Christ by opting for vulnerability and weakness, sensed all this, although she used different language from that of a modern theologian. When she speaks of the poverty, humility and love of Christ, she is describing the Icon of Innocence hung on the cross for our consideration: 'In that mirror shine blessed poverty, holy humility and unutterable love as, by the grace of God, you can contemplate in the whole mirror.' (4Ag 18)

In that mirror we see the non-possessiveness of Christ through whom the universe was created; we see the one who, by emptying himself was able to hold authority as totally loving service. We are unable to grasp the fullness of Christ's being, but Clare came close to understanding it by, I suspect, continual reflection of what we might call the size of the space which Christ had to carve out in order to contain this radical self-emptying. This is what she is groping for when she speaks of his 'blessed poverty, holy humility and unutterable love'. She can have no other words for this than the traditional ones of poverty, humility, innocence, 'the King of Angels, Lord of heaven and earth, lies in a manger'.

As we read her letters, we sense the paradoxes piling up in her mind and illumined for us by the intensity of her awareness. The riches behind this self-emptying of Christ seem powerfully real to her especially in the fourth letter where the extremes are held in a tense balance, each revealing and enriching the other, both indicating something beyond our understanding. This victim, she says, is the One 'at whose beauty all the heavenly hosts ceaselessly admire.' (4Ag 10)

This wholly Poor Man is the goal of all our journeying, both the map of our travelling and the landscape across which we travel for he is also one of us. More than that, he is the revelation of our true self to each of us. In him we will come to our true home and discover that while we journeyed we had been travelling through him, living with him and journeying in him. In the words of Boethius: 'Thou art the journey and the journey's end.'

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