

# “STIRRINGS OF THE SPIRIT”

## THE INCARNATIONAL PRAYER OF CLARE OF ASSISI

---

SR. CLARE D’AURIA OSF



As I began to think about what I would share with you today and prepared to attend the first planning meeting last October, I wondered what possible connection there would be between the theme of this conference with its central image of water and the prayer life of Clare of Assisi. However, as I began to pray with this image myself and reflect on the heart of Clare as I have come to know her over the years, the opening lines from a poem by Carmelite poet and mystic, Jessica Powers, came back to me and I knew I had both the connection I was looking for and the title for this presentation. In her poem, “To Live with the Spirit,” Powers writes,

*To live with the Spirit of God is to be a listener,  
It is to keep the vigil of mystery, earthless and still.  
One leans to catch the stirrings of the Spirit,  
strange as the wind’s will.<sup>1</sup>*

In these five brief lines, the poet captures the soul of contemplative prayer and the heart of Clare of Assisi. Attentive to the “stirrings” of the Spirit of God as she hovers over the sometimes chaotic waters of all that is created, Clare looks and listens for the Word that will inevitably speak to her of the mystery of Incarnation: the mystery of the poverty of the God who took flesh and became fully human in Jesus Christ. And once she discovers the truth of this mystery on Palm Sunday, 1212, she commits her life to “keep . . . vigil” at the foot of the cross of this “strange mystery”: to “gaze, consider, contemplate” so that she might “imitate [her] Spouse.”<sup>2</sup>

As we begin this time, then, I invite you to “lean to catch the stirrings of the Spirit” within the sometimes chaotic waters of your own heart as we sit “earthless and still” with our Sister Clare. Since I want us to reverence these “stirrings,” I will be offering significant pauses in the course of my presentation so that each of us can “listen” to the Word speaking within us. In order to continue our listening, I will also be asking you to maintain a respectful silence during the half-hour break that will follow. Then, after our break, I will provide some opportunity for table sharing so that we can “lean” into the wisdom and life experiences of one another through the sisterhood and brotherhood that is so intrinsic to our Franciscan charism. And now I remind myself and each of us that, when we invite ourselves into the sacred space that is the contemplative heart of another person’s relationship with God, we remember that, in the presence of such “mystery,” we can only at best “keep the vigil.”

### *Incarnational Prayer: “The Poor Crucified” Christ*

Last March, I caught a segment on CBS’ “60 Minutes” that stirred something unmistakable in me on the evening I first watched it.<sup>3</sup> Since viewing it, I have prayed with it many times, so much so that it has become a kind of allegory for me that illuminates the invitation and the demands, the call and the conversion which are inherent in one’s choosing to be faithful to a contemplative way of life.

The interview featured a community of sea gypsies called the Moken. Among the least touched by modern civilization, they’ve lived for hundreds of years on the islands off the coast of Thailand and Burma. Although they live precisely where the devastating tsunami of 2004 hit the hardest, they suffered no casualties at all because as people who are born on the sea, live on the sea, and die on the sea, they know how to read the signs of the sea. And, as interviewer Bob Simon noted, “It was their intimacy with the sea that saved them.”

On December 26, the day the tsunami hit, Saleh Kalathalay, a skilled spear-fisherman, noticed that a strange silence had come over the waters. Then, he told Simon, “The water receded very fast and one wave, one small wave, came and I knew—this is not ordinary.” He began to run around warning others, but few believed him. So he brought the skeptics to the water’s edge where they too saw the signs from the sea. Eventually everyone, the Moken and the tourists, listened to the warnings from the sea, climbed to higher ground and were saved. Their village, however, was completely destroyed. Later in the interview, Saleh was asked why he knew something was wrong, and the Burmese commercial fishermen, also at sea at the time the tsunami hit, did not. Saleh replied, “They were too busy collecting squid. They were not really looking at anything. They saw nothing, they looked at nothing. They don’t know how to look. They were too busy collecting squid.”

Clare of Assisi knew “how to look” and “how to read the signs” of her times written on the hillsides of Mount Subasio where the small and walled town of Assisi is nestled in the Umbrian Valley about halfway between the cities of Perugia and Foligno, ninety miles north of Rome. As she stood with her townspeople on the brink of the 13th century, Clare also stood apart from them because she knew how to “listen” to the “strange silence”: to that paradoxical voice of God that rumbled quietly beneath the noise and clang (cf *1 Cor 13:1*) of warring factions and clashing feudal classes fighting for their lives in a political and social system headed toward extinction.

Unlike those among the nobility who stood at the “edge” of the impending disaster but failed to see what was coming, and unlike those among the rising merchant class who were “too busy” taking advantage of such pervasive societal upheaval to either “look” or “listen,” Clare knew how to pay attention to the “stirrings” made by the “one small wave” that was “the Poor Crucified” Christ (*ILAg*, 13) incarnated in the countless and unnoticed, poor and marginalized who knocked at her family’s door. And, most importantly, because she knew “something was wrong,” she “listened to the warnings” and, against all traditional, cultural, and conventional wisdom, she “climbed to higher ground and [was] saved.” Again, paradoxically, as only God’s designs could envision, Clare’s climbing to “higher ground” set her on a journey of choosing not upward but downward nobility, a journey that would take an irrevocable turn on Palm Sunday, 1212, in the Cathedral of San Rufino. From that day forward, Clare would remain at the “water’s edge” and “keep the vigil of mystery,” always watching for the “one small wave.”

“Keeping the vigil of mystery” is essential to human life, but especially to a life of prayer. For Franciscans, however, it is essential that we keep our prayer vigil in the presence of the mystery of Incarnation. In her book, *Franciscan Prayer*, Iliia Delio, O.S.F., clearly states: “The simplest way to describe Franciscan prayer is that it begins and ends with the Incarnation.”<sup>4</sup> From my perspective, this kind of “incarnational prayer” is grounded in a contemplative way of life that sees and hears the cyclic pattern of flesh made Word and Word made flesh repeated over and over again in the ebb and flow of one’s own life experience. Such a vision of life demands a disciplined and focused attentiveness to both the subtle and the seismic “stirrings” of the water: to both the formative, daily experiences, as well as to the unique and unrepeatable transformative events which happen over the course one’s life journey and indicate the unmistakable presence of the invisible God become visible in Jesus Christ.

Although we have no extant prayers from Clare as we have from Francis, that is, prayers consciously written as such, the formative experiences of her daily prayer life in San Damiano evidence her own incarnation of the ebb and flow of the Paschal Mystery. Her four *Letters to Agnes of Prague*,<sup>5</sup> along with the witness of her own sisters whose testimony is recorded in *The Acts of the Process of Canonization*, invite each of us to “gaze,” “consider,” and “contemplate” the heart of this woman where we, too, can touch the “stirrings of the Spirit” expressed in her unwavering, “passionate desire” for “the Poor Crucified.” It is these letters and the text of her life that we want to “read,” reflect upon, and pray with today so that, like Clare, we might “be strengthened in the holy service” which we have undertaken (*ILAg*, 13) and “direct [our] attention to what [we] should desire above all else: to have the Spirit of the Lord and Its holy activity, to pray always to Him with a pure heart” (*RCl*, 10:9).

## PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

### *Before Her Conversion: Clare’s Preferential Option for the Poor*

The formative experiences of her daily life, even before her conversion, attest to the truth that, from her earliest days, Clare knows how to “gaze” at the world in which she lives. It is this “world” that she brings before God in prayer—this “flesh” of the “other” that she carries in her own heart. Ingrid Peterson, O.S.F., acknowledges that “The testimonies of the women who lived in the house of Favarone Offreduccio help to construct a picture of Clare as a young woman in the midst of Assisi’s activity” and a “portrait” of the household as “an extended family of holy women.”<sup>6</sup> In this primary sacred space with

women of like vision, who “either lived together or came together frequently for common spiritual exercises,”<sup>7</sup> Clare finds support for the penitential way of life she has chosen.

Many of these women were later examined by the Church as part of the process of Clare’s canonization. Witness after witness from among these women agree with Pacifica de Guelfuccio of Assisi, the first person to be interviewed and to narrate Clare’s story: “while that holy woman [Clare] was in the world in her father’s house . . . she was considered by all those who knew her [to be a person] of great honesty and of very good life; and that she was intent upon and occupied with works of piety” (*Proc* 1.1).<sup>8</sup> However, it is only Pacifica who notes most exactly that, although “all the citizens held her [Clare] in great veneration,” Clare herself had already narrowed her gaze: “Lady Clare very much loved the poor” (*Proc* 1.3).

We can only imagine what happens within Clare’s own heart as, day after day, “she willingly visited the poor” (*Proc* 1.4) and prays with and shares those experiences within the “enclosure” of the Offreduccio household. What we do know is that this formative “gazing” on the “flesh” of those who are poor leads her to “consider” the Crucified Word that was calling and challenging her to incarnate a way of life markedly different from that of her contemporaries. To glimpse the mystery of God at work in the heart of Clare, I again turn to Jessica Powers whose poem, “The Master Beggar,” offers us some insight into what happens with this kind of formative gazing and considering: flesh made Word becomes *the* Word made flesh and one truly sees the face of Jesus in the face of those who are poor.

*Worse than the poorest mendicant alive,  
the pencil man, the blind man with his breath  
of music shaming all who do not give,  
are You to me, Jesus of Nazareth.*

*Must You take up Your post on every block  
of every street? Do I have no release?  
Is there no room of earth that I can lock  
to Your sad face, Your pitiful whisper “Please”?*

*I seek the counters of time’s gleaming store  
but make no purchases, for You are there.  
How can I waste one coin while you implore  
with tear-soiled cheeks and dark blood-matted hair?*

*And when I offer You in charity  
pennies minted by love, still, still You stand  
fixing Your sorrowful wide eyes on me.  
Must all my purse be emptied in Your hand?*

*Jesus, my beggar, what would You have of me?  
Father and mother? The lover I longed to know?  
The child I would have cherished tenderly?  
Even the blood that through my heart’s valves flow?*

*I too would be a beggar. Long tormented,  
I dream to grant You all and stand apart  
with You on some bleak corner, tear-frequented,  
and trouble mankind for its human heart.<sup>9</sup>*

“Jesus, my beggar . . . I too would be a beggar.” True contemplation leads to imitation and, again, the flesh of Jesus becomes the commit-

ted Word of God incarnated in this woman who chose to be poor—as Jesus was poor and as those who are poor, were poor.

In order to give “flesh” to the Word which she hears in her own prayer, Clare, before she is eighteen years old, makes a radical break with her social class by selling her inheritance and giving the money to the poor.<sup>10</sup> By disposing of her inheritance in this way, she not only gives her assets to those who are poor, but she herself becomes poor. Clare Marie Ledoux elaborates on the significance of this choice as an irreversible turning point in the life of Clare:

*From then on, her opting for poverty set her up against the noble class of her lineage. From the time of her conversion, poverty became and would remain for Clare a way of life, the indispensable foundation for realizing her religious ideal. By her choice to live in poverty, like Francis, although in her own original way, Clare was challenging a society in which strength, power and money were masters and in which the church itself was the empire’s rival power.<sup>11</sup>*

Renouncing her inheritance, along with the private vow of virginity she had previously made,<sup>12</sup> solidifies Clare’s undesirability as a prospective bride, thus protecting the inviolability of the decision she had made to receive her holy vocation. Ingrid Peterson, O.S.F., notes the practical wisdom Clare evidences in making such a conscious and counter-cultural choice:

*Clare claimed legal and social rights in choosing poverty, and the personal right to make decisions about her body in choosing the state of virginity. Seizing these individual rights, Clare was able to bring to her religious reception “the gift of poverty and the vow of chaste virginity,” described as her dowry by Pope Innocent IV.<sup>13</sup>*

Throughout her life, Clare will continue to display this kind of practical wisdom in dealing with both the political and ecclesial environments in which she finds herself. However, it is the wisdom of her heart, her “passionate desire” to imitate “the Poor Crucified,” that impels her to “grant [Jesus] all and stand apart with [Him].” Indeed, she had “emptied” her entire “purse” into the “hand” of the “Master Beggar”: “The lover [she] longed to know. . . The child [she] would have cherished tenderly.”

As we ourselves take a contemplative gaze at the process underneath the narrative of these events which occurred even before her “conversion,” we see that the “stirrings” reveal a formative pattern of incarnational prayer—really, incarnational living—that will thread through the tapestry of Clare’s life. She “gazes” on the “flesh” of her daily experience because she knows that all that is created has the potential to speak to her of God and that the human person who “groans” in concert with all of creation is the privileged place for God’s self-revelation in Christ (cf *Rom* 8:22). If, through prayer and reflection, she then “considers” her experiences, that is, she listens to them “in stereo”<sup>14</sup> and looks at them again in the light of the Gospels, that “flesh” becomes the “Word of God” that invites her into a contemplative experience with the “Word made flesh” in Jesus Christ. In that mysterious place within the human heart where lovers meet, she “contemplates” herself, both as she is and as she is transformed by the One who loves her. And in that mystic moment, so “desiring to imitate” the One she loves, she truly becomes, in her own flesh, the image of this Word of Love. This process, as we describe it happening in Clare, also happens in each of us if we truly desire, like her, to “be a beggar” too. Flesh made Word and Word made flesh: this is the movement and the mystery of incarnational prayer.

## PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

### *Clare’s Conversion: Making the Passover with Christ*

If this “pattern” of prayer is already discernible in Clare before her conversion, how, then, are we to understand the Palm Sunday event? Given the fact that Clare is leading a penitential way of life before meeting Francis, it seems more consistent to view her conversion, not so much as the radical shift of life orientation which liminal experiences provide, but rather as a radical shift in how Clare is to give expression to what she had already discerned as her call.<sup>15</sup> When Clare leaves her family home and her former way of expressing her call, she takes on the beginnings of a new form of life which will enable her to continue to express that same call at a deeper level.

Although Clare herself remembers this experience on Palm Sunday as the moment of her “conversion” and a critical turning point in her personal journey,<sup>16</sup> it must more importantly be viewed as the inevitable consequence of her “daily” fidelity to the kind of incarnational prayer we have already seen evidenced in her *before* her conversion. In fact, according to Margaret Carney, O.S.F., Clare’s conversion is an experience in which she “summoned the primordial and graced energies of her entire human existence and focused them into a laser point of light and fortitude.”<sup>17</sup>

What “stirrings of the Spirit” move Clare to such a “primordial and graced” place? What “mystery” compels this woman to journey with certainty into a completely unknown future, walking in “light and fortitude”? In reflecting on her own “conversion experience,” one grounded in her own kind of incarnational prayer, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, Mary Oliver, offers us her own answer to these questions and may provide some insight into what may have been happening in the heart of Clare. “Listen” to her poem “The Journey,” and “lean” with me to “catch the stirrings” in her heart, in Clare’s heart and in your own.

*One day you finally knew  
what you had to do, and began,  
though the voices around you  
kept shouting  
their bad advice--  
though the whole house  
began to tremble  
and you felt the old tug  
at your ankles.  
“Mend my life!”  
each voice cried.  
But you didn’t stop.  
You knew what you had to do,  
though the wind pried  
with its stiff fingers  
at the very foundations,  
though their melancholy  
was terrible.  
It was already late  
enough, and a wild night,  
and the road full of fallen  
branches and stones.  
But little by little,  
as you left their voices behind,  
the stars began to burn  
through the sheets of clouds,  
and there was a new voice*

*which you slowly  
recognized as your own,  
that kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world,  
determined to do  
the only thing you could do--  
determined to save  
the only life you could save.<sup>18</sup>*

Palm Sunday is this kind of “one day” for Clare, “the day [she finally knew what [she] had to do, and began, though the voices around [her] kept shouting their bad advice.” In that moment when, according to the author of *The Legend of Saint Clare*, she “remained immobile in her place (7),” all the days of faithful gazing come together with the unmistakable clarity that is contemplative certainty, and she “knew what [she] had to do, though the wind pried with its stiff fingers at the very foundations, though their melancholy was terrible.”

As she continues to participate in the celebration of the liturgy and hears, as she has probably never heard before, the proclamation of the Passion, flesh again becomes Word for her, and she feels confirmed in the choice she had already considered: to let the Word become flesh in her by making her own passover in imitation of the Jesus whom she experiences as remaining poor and powerless in the face of his impending death. With the “light and fortitude” she receives in this mystic moment, Clare is convinced that the only response to the love of an all good God poured out in the kenosis of Jesus Christ is the extravagance of a love fully expressed only in a life of absolute poverty, that is, in the alabaster vessel of her very self, broken and poured out.

And so, although “it was already late enough, and a wild night, and the road full of fallen branches and stones,” Clare “left [all other] voices behind” and, as *The Legend* continues, “she embarked upon her long desired flight.” Her departure, described in the most powerful symbols of death and resurrection, takes her on a journey away from her family home, by way of “that other door” which “she broke open with her own hands,” to a place outside the walls of all that was familiar and through the darkness of the woods that finally leads her from Assisi to the Portiuncula and eventually to San Damiano.<sup>19</sup> In this place, Clare will live her remaining forty-two years in daily faithfulness to the gift of her vocation given to her by a faithful God.

*Among the other gifts that we have received and continue  
to receive from our magnanimous Father of mercies (2 Cor 1:3),  
and for which we must express the deepest thanks to our glorious God,  
there is our vocation, which the more perfect and greater it is,  
the more are we indebted to Him (2-3).*

She witnesses to this experience of mutual fidelity at the very beginning of her *Testament*: It is to her daily life of incarnational prayer that we will next turn our attention. As we read the text of her life and letters, we will journey with her in discovering that the “new voice” which she “slowly recognized as [her] own,” was, indeed, becoming the voice of “the Poor Crucified” Christ who “kept [her] company as [she] strode deeper and deeper into the world.”

#### PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

#### Living in San Damiano: “The Fullness of the Incarnation”

As we now keep Clare “company” on her journey “deeper and deeper” into the world, I offer us a caution. Although we will walk this journey with Clare in a kind of “sequential” manner and will explore, in somewhat of a “logical” order, the daily experience of her gazing, considering, contemplating, and imitating, we need to remember that, as we know from our own experience, life events, especially those which involve developing relationships, do not happen in logical or sequential order. Rather, they spiral downward in ever narrowing and deepening circles through providentially directed happenings which occur simultaneously, spontaneously, surprisingly, and seldom safely. Almost never developing or progressing in the kind of clearly delineated stages which we sometimes use to mark the movements and turns in the spiritual journey,<sup>20</sup> they nevertheless transform us in such a way that there is no turning around or turning back—only turning forward and turning toward.

The irrevocable and irreversible place in which Clare finds herself after Palm Sunday, 1212—the interior place in which she stands as she begins her life in San Damiano—is captured well, I believe, in a poem by David Whyte entitled “All the True Vows.”

*All the true vows  
are secret vows  
the ones we speak out loud  
are the ones we break.*

*There is only one life  
you can call your own  
and a thousand others  
you can call by any name you want.*

*Hold to the truth you make  
every day with your own body,  
don't turn your face away.*

*Hold to your own truth  
at the center of the image  
you were born with.*

*Those who do not understand  
their destiny will never understand  
the friends they have made  
nor the work they have chosen*

*nor the one life that waits  
beyond all the others.*

*By the lake in the wood  
in the shadows  
you can  
whisper that truth  
to the quiet reflection  
you see in the water.*

*Whatever you hear from  
the water, remember,*

*it wants to carry  
the sound of its truth on your lips.*

*Remember,  
in this place  
no one can hear you*

*and out of the silence  
you can make a promise  
it will kill you to break,*

*that way you'll find  
what is real and what is not.*

*I know what I am saying.  
Time almost forsook me  
and I looked again.*

*Seeing my reflection  
I broke a promise  
and spoke*

*for the first time  
after all these years*

*in my own voice,*

*before it was too late  
to turn my face again.<sup>21</sup>*

Throughout her life in San Damiano, Clare will “hold to the truth”—to the “true vows” to which she committed herself on Palm Sunday. She will “hold to [her] own truth at the center of the image [she was] born with” and, borne from the “silence” of her prayer, she will “carry the sound of its truth on [her] lips.” And, every day, as she hears “the Poor Crucified” Christ “whisper that truth to the quiet reflection” she sees when she looks at herself in the eyes of Jesus, Clare will choose again to live that truth rooted in “a promise” that it would “kill [her] to break.”

Again, it is Ilia Delio, O.S.F., who explains this formative and transformative interchange between how one lives and how one prays:

*. . . contemplation is bound to transformation.  
We cannot help seeing—gazing—on the crucified God  
for long without being changed. And this change,  
this gazing on the God of self-giving love, must eventually  
impel us to love by way of self-gift. In this way,  
we realize the greatness of our vocation that is  
to bear Christ, to become a Christic person.  
Only in and through this “Christification” do we  
see the world as the sacrament of God,  
and all of creation as holy ground. Engagement with  
the other becomes an engagement with God.  
Contemplation is not directed toward heaven but toward  
the fullness of the Incarnation.<sup>22</sup>*

It is to “the fullness of the Incarnation” that Clare directs her gaze during the forty-two years in which she lives in San Damiano. Unlike her contemporaries, that is, other enclosed communities of women whose monastic regulations proscribed restrictions around seeing and being seen,<sup>23</sup> Clare continues to direct her “gaze”—and that of her sisters—on the “flesh” of those who are poor. On any given day, the “poor” might appear on the other side of the parlor or choir grille as the face of a hungry beggar who comes to share in the meager portion of bread

that the sisters could offer. After the death of Francis, the “poor” might look like a pilgrim journeying to visit the places already named “holy” in the popular imagination of those who knew or knew of the Poverello and his brothers. At other times, the “poor” might take the form of a friar returning from his mission in Africa with all the news of how the Gospel was being preached.

In whatever face appears in the frame of this grilled icon, Clare sees the face of “the Poor Crucified” Christ, the same face that she gazes upon when she prays before the icon of the crucifix that had spoken to Francis in the early days of his conversion. But, as Michael Blastic, O.F.M. Conv., so insightfully notes, Clare does not gaze only on Jesus: “The uniqueness of the San Damiano cross lies in the image of a Jesus who is not alone—he is surrounded by others.”<sup>24</sup> So, too, Clare is surrounded by her sisters as together they gaze on “the fullness of the Incarnation” imaged, not only in this icon, but in the faces of one another. And, in this mutual exchange of loving reverence, they are formative and transformative for one another.

This Christ, who is Brother to each of them, continues throughout Clare’s life to return her gaze, his eyes silently speaking the same words spoken to Francis: “Go and repair my house.”<sup>25</sup> Thomas of Celano testifies to the efficacy of Clare’s life and of her prayer in rebuilding, not only the Church and the world, but the Franciscan “order” itself: “The Lady Clare, a native of the city of Assisi, the most precious and strongest stone of the whole structure, stands as the foundation for all the other stones. . . . A noble structure of precious pearls arose above this woman” (*ICel* 8.18).

So, day after day, flesh becomes Word and Word becomes flesh as Clare gazes upon the “face” of those who are poor and upon the face of “the Poor Crucified” Christ imaged in her sisters and in the icon that is always before her, and she is formed and transformed and rebuilds the Church in the process. Her life experience, then, is formative for her prayer and her prayer, formative for her life. Of this intimate connection between the concerns of her world and her enclosed daily life and daily prayer, Marco Bartoli writes:

*She [Clare] transcended the limits of the hermitage [read enclosure]  
in two directions: from the inside toward the outside, by accepting  
that she was an example, a model, one who had something to say to  
the whole Church; and from the outside towards the inside, by the way  
in which she and her sisters welcomed whoever and whatever came  
from the outside, so that everything becomes their concern.<sup>26</sup>*

One of Clare’s concerns was the fledgling community begun by Agnes of Prague in 1234. Agnes, a princess of Bohemia, had been betrothed to Frederick II, Emperor of Germany but, like Clare, she had made a private vow of virginity and could not be coerced into marrying. When she writes *The First Letter to Agnes of Prague* sometime before June of that year, Clare is forty years old and has already lived twenty-two of them in San Damiano. However, because the letter is directed toward this woman who is, in some sense, just “beginning the public aspect of her conversion,” it “recreates Clare’s personal conviction at the early stage of her spiritual journey. . . . her own understanding of poverty as the starting point of her spiritual maturity. While there is much evidence in Clare’s writings and life that she loved poverty and loved the poor, her desire to live without property is grounded in her imitation of Jesus.”<sup>27</sup> In this letter, so focused on the necessity of poverty, Clare directs Agnes and each of us to “gaze” in the same direction:

*Be strengthened in the holy service of  
the Poor Crucified undertaken with a passionate desire,  
Who endured the sufferings of the cross for us all . . .  
O God-centered poverty, whom the Lord Jesus Christ . . .  
came down to embrace before all else! (13, 14, 17)*

Like the Moken fisherman we spoke of earlier, Clare knows how and where to look. And, who and what she sees looks back at her, and she is transformed in the process. However, everything and everyone that Clare sees also has its own voice which speaks to her with formative and transformative power. From the “outside” she hears the poor, the pilgrim, the friar, and, from the “inside,” the voices of her sisters. So, like that same fisherman, she also needs to know how to listen and how to choose what to really “consider” from all that she hears. In the “strange silence” so essential to her enclosed life in San Damiano, Clare listens to each of these voices. However, like her gazing through the grille, Clare’s listening to both the silence and the speaking is also framed: framed by her communal experience of Eucharist and of her praying with her sisters the Liturgy of the Hours which marks the passing of time each day, as well as the movement through the seasons each year.

Within the rhythm of this liturgical prayer, Clare listens day after day and year after year to the “Song of the Suffering Servant,” sung in the music of the Scriptural Word and played out in her own life and in the lives of her sisters. Over and over again, she hears the story of the same “Poor Crucified” Christ, upon whom she is gazing, recounted in the Gospels and proclaimed by the prophets and offered for her consideration and meditation. And, in chorus with her sisters, Clare lifts her own voice in the “psalms, hymns and inspired songs” (cf Col 3:16) which were part of the Liturgy of the Hours of the medieval Church. The paschal experience of Jesus, central to all liturgical prayer, is the mystery within which she chooses to pattern her own life’s rhythm and keeps faithful “vigil.” In *The Second Letter to Agnes of Prague*, written between 1234 and 1238, Clare speaks of the formative power of this kind of prayer through which one listens to and considers one’s life within the context of this larger Word of God. It impacts, Clare tells Agnes and each of us, the very way in which we hear our lives happening at a more deeply, emotional level:

*If you suffer with Him, you will reign with Him.  
weeping with Him, you will rejoice with Him;  
dying on the cross of tribulation with Him,  
you will possess heavenly mansions with Him among  
the splendor of the saints and in the Book of Life, your name  
will be called glorious among the peoples (21).*

And, as Clare listens to this mystery, not only in the Scriptural Word, but also “considers” this mystery in the word which comes to her in the cries of those who are poor, in the voices of her sisters, and in the word spoken in the silence of her own heart, she hears the same message: no matter the source, the Word which she is always invited to “consider” is the Word made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ and how this Word calls her to be poor in imitation him.

Always, always, it is Clare’s “passionate desire” for “the Poor Crucified” which drives her and leads her. This is what her gazing leads her to see. This is what her listening leads her to consider and eventually understand: that, for love of her, Jesus freely takes upon himself the limits inherent in being flesh—the poverty intrinsic to being human. Once Clare brings the consideration of this truth to the point of conviction, nothing can deter her. This vision of poverty as having a privileged place because Jesus is “the Poor Crucified” One will determine how she

sees not only herself, but the way of life she envisions for her sisters. Indeed, it is this vision that empowers her strong-willed, tenacious, and unyielding grip on the “Privilege of Poverty” granted to her by the Church. Finally, it is this vision that enables Clare to contemplate in such a way that this Word becomes flesh in her, over and over again, and always more deeply and truly.

Her contemplating empowers her to see herself as she is, to see herself as a “we” with her sisters,<sup>28</sup> and to see herself and all others in and as the image of Christ. Her acceptance of the poverty of being human—of saying “yes” with one’s life to the limits of being human and to the glory of loving without limits—unites her with Jesus in an intimate and inextricable way. So contemplation necessitates imitation, and imitation, transformation, and the Word again becomes flesh: Christ is imaged in Clare and Clare is constantly being re-imagined as herself and re-created as the image of Christ. “What is original to Clare is that transformation/imitation of Christ cannot take place apart from contemplation, and contemplation involves self-identity or acceptance of oneself in relation to God.”<sup>29</sup>

Clare sees herself and, consequently, her sisters and every other person, inserted into the mystery of Christ and, through Christ, into the mystery of God, in a very real, ontological way. Her much reflected upon “mirror” image, obviously borne from her own prayer experience, invites us to contemplate continually both the mystery of being human and the mystery of God become human, the Word incarnate who is always and forever, “the Poor Crucified” Christ. In *The Third Letter to Agnes of Prague*, Clare offers Agnes spiritual direction, as it were, by focusing her contemplation:

*Place your mind before the mirror of eternity!  
Place your soul in the brilliance of glory!  
Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance and, through  
contemplation, transform your entire being into the image  
of the Godhead Itself (12-13).*

Although the imperatives of her injunction may sound daunting to us, Clare believes this call is for everyone: for those “outside” as well as for those “inside.” She “provides a common path to contemplation because what she advocates is daily prayer before the cross—something every person can do . . . [because] the cross provides the most honest reflection of ourselves.”<sup>30</sup> To contemplate the suffering Christ is to look at the poverty of our own human condition and that of others and know that God understands because, in Jesus, God has been where we are. To contemplate Christ crucified is to look at ourselves and others and know that death does not have the last word because the Incarnate Word, risen in glory, speaks the Word of Life. Ledoux says very clearly:

*The mystery of poverty essentially is part of the mystery  
of salvation and the gospel. Poverty is evangelical in the strongest  
sense of the term. It is in and by it that we live the heart  
of the Good News. Christ’s Resurrection is the revelation of  
the staggering fruitfulness of poverty. Christ the Lord is indeed  
the “poor Christ” of Nazareth, raised in glory because  
he lived poverty to the extreme limit of love. All human beings  
benefit from this rising, not just the oppressed and the  
hungry but also the richest among us.<sup>31</sup>*

So, all of us are called to heed the advice Clare offers in *The Fourth Letter to Agnes of Prague* about the necessity of praying with “the Poor Crucified” Christ. In this letter, probably written just months before her death, we find Clare reiterating the imperatives of praying in

the incarnational way we have spent this time together describing and reflecting upon: prayer in which flesh becomes Word so that *the Word* can again become flesh in you and in me. Look on the Crucified Christ now, and listen to Clare’s words as we bring our time to a close:

*Gaze upon that mirror each day, O Queen and Spouse  
of Jesus Christ, and continually study your face in it . . .  
Indeed, in that mirror, blessed poverty, holy humility, and  
inexpressible charity shine forth, as, with the grace  
of God, you will be able to contemplate them throughout the  
entire mirror. . . . Look, I say, at the border of this mirror,  
that is, the poverty of Him Who was placed in a manger and wrapped  
in swaddling clothes. . . . Then reflect upon, at the surface  
of the mirror, the holy humility, at least the blessed poverty,  
the untold labors and punishments that He endured  
for the redemption of the whole human race.  
Finally contemplate, in the depth of this same mirror, the  
ineffable charity that He chose to suffer on the tree of the Cross and  
to die there the most shameful kind of death (15-26).*

Like Clare, gaze on Jesus, and you will become like the One you see. Like Clare, consider Jesus and you will be transformed. Like Clare, contemplate Jesus and you will see yourself with new eyes as you look at him looking back at you with delight and with love. And finally, like Clare, imitate this Jesus of the Gospels, the Incarnate Word of God, and, follow his way of washing feet, nourishing others from your table, healing the sick and the sick of heart, preaching by your example, and living poverty stretched out to the limits of love.

#### **PAUSE FOR SILENT HALF-HOUR BREAK RETURN FOR TABLE CONVERSATION**

##### **Introduction to Table Conversation**

Like Clare, the experiences of my daily life and, thus, of my daily prayer can be formative for me, that is, they can hover over my interior chaos as the “stirrings of the Spirit” of the living God creatively at work within me. As truly my “flesh,” these experiences can reveal and speak God’s Word to me in such a powerful and creative way that they can, in the words of the old charismatic hymn, “melt me” and “mold me,” indeed, recreate me into the image and likeness of *the Word* made Flesh: Jesus Christ. My prayer, then, is bound with my life in such an inextricably mutual way that it becomes what I have called incarnational prayer: flesh becomes Word and Word becomes flesh, in Christ and in me.

*Who or what* I gaze upon in my daily experience and in my daily prayer matters, then, because it is *formative* for me in this *incarnational* way. And depending on “who” the who is or “what” the what is, I may be formed in this incarnational way in the image and likeness of Jesus Christ, or in some other image and likeness. In either case, I am being formed and transformed, so, I need, like Clare, to choose wisely *who or what* I look upon. As we reflect on Clare’s own gazing and on her exhortation to Agnes, we must ask ourselves: Who or what do I gaze upon in my daily experience? Who or what do I gaze upon when I come to prayer or to my prayer space? Do I see *those who are poor*? Do I see those who are poor? Do I see *my sisters and/or brothers* with whom I live? Do I see my sisters and brothers with whom I live?

I also need, like Clare, to choose wisely who or what I listen to, who or what I “consider” in my daily experience and in my daily prayer because, again, these are formative for me. As we reflect on Clare’s own considering and on her exhortation to Agnes, we must ask ourselves:

Who or what do I listen to and consider in my daily experience? Who or what do I listen to and consider when I come to prayer or to my prayer space? Do I really listen to the voices of others and take these voices to the silence of my own prayer? Is the Scriptural Word the focus of my listening and considering so that it becomes formative for me, or does my listening and considering focus elsewhere? What is the place of silence in my day? In my prayer?

What is the place of communal liturgical prayer in the rhythm of my day, my week, my year? How is it that I pray with my sisters or with my brothers in community? How is it that I pray with others? What is the focus of our listening and considering in these communal prayer experiences? How is this prayer incarnational, forming me in such a way that it deepens my desire to enfold the paschal mystery of Jesus in my own life, that is, in poverty stretched out to the limits of love?

I also need to reflect on who or what I see when I look in the metaphorical “mirror” of myself. As we reflect on the intimate connection Clare sees between contemplation and imitation and on her exhortation to Agnes in this regard, we must ask ourselves: Do I see myself as I truly am—both flawed and graced? Do I see myself, not only as “the fairest one of all,” but also as part of the human family, as one who is truly intrinsically poor and, therefore one with and at home with those who are poor? Do I dare to see the image of “the Poor Crucified” One when I contemplate myself and experience myself as “beloved” by God, both as myself and as the image of the Christ? Does this vision impel me, like the One I contemplate, to imitate his choice for the downward mobility that led him to live poverty stretched to the extreme limits of love? How do I contemplate others in the light of this vision, especially my sisters and brothers in community? How does my imitation look like washing feet, nourishing others from my table, healing the sick and the sick of heart, and preaching by example—all in mutual exchange?

##### **Guide for Table Conversation**

##### **Conclusion: Climbing to Higher Ground**

Unlike the commercial fisherman who had neither the eyes nor the ears of the Moken, see the “one small wave” and listen to the call to climb to “higher ground.” It is from this vantage point that, like Jesus, like Clare, we will again be impelled by love to make the choice for downward mobility and the privilege of poverty. And, in the “strange silence” that we have come to understand as the paradoxical voice of God, we too will hear “The Song of the Waterfall” that the sojourner, Much-Afraid, hears on her passage to the “High Places” in Hannah Hurnard’s classic allegory on the journey of the spiritual life.

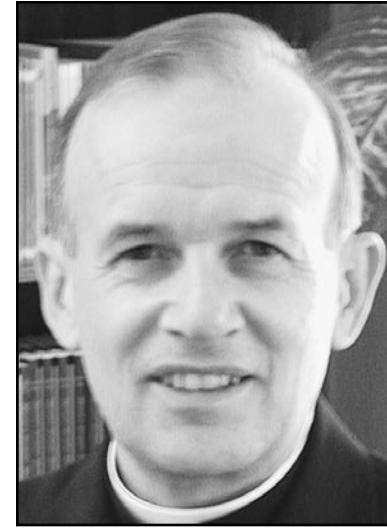
Toward the mid-point of the story, the Shepherd leads Much-Afraid to the “Place of Anointing” where she will make the choice for downward mobility and begin the final phase of her journey to the “High Places.” As they stand together “at the foot of the cliffs,” they hear the “voice of a mighty waterfall . . . whose rushing waters sprang from the snows in the High Places themselves . . . As she listened, Much-Afraid realized that she was hearing the full majestic harmonies, the whole orchestra as it were . . . thousands upon thousands of voices . . . yet still the same song:

*From the heights we leap and go  
To the valleys down below,  
Always answering the call,  
To the lowest place of all.*

When the Shepherd asks Much-Afraid, “What do you think of this fall of great waters in their abandonment of self-giving?” she replies, “I think they are beautiful and terrible beyond anything which I ever saw before.” “Why terrible?” the Shepherd asks, already knowing the answer. “It is the leap which they have to make, the awful height from which they must cast themselves down to the depths beneath, there to be broken on the rocks. I can hardly bear to watch it.” However, at the bidding of the Shepherd, Much-Afraid looks more closely, and begins to see her experience with his eyes and to hear “The Song of the Waterfall” with his ears and so is able to make the rest of the journey. The Shepherd says:

*At first sight perhaps the leap does look terrible,  
but as you can see, the water itself finds no terror in it, no moment  
of hesitation or shrinking, only joy unspeakable, and full of glory,  
because it is the movement natural to it. Self-giving is its life.  
It has only one desire, to go down and down and give itself  
with no reserve or holding back of any kind.<sup>32</sup>*

Let this be our prayer: to have this “only one desire.” Like Jesus, like Clare, like Much-Afraid let us listen, in our living and in our praying, to the “stirrings of the Spirit” in “The Song of the Waterfall” that is the Paschal Mystery of “the Poor Crucified” Christ. Like Jesus, like Clare, like Much-Afraid let us beg for the grace to take the plunge, enfold the Word, and fall with joy into the loving arms of God.



## THE CONTRIBUTION OF FRANCIS’ PRAYER TO THE CHURCH’S COMMUNIO AND MISSIO

FATHER EDWARD FOLEY, OFM CAPUCHIN © 2006

### FOOTNOTES

1. *Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers*, Eds. Regina Siegfried, A.S.C., and Robert F. Morneau (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1989).
2. *2LAg*, 20. All citations from the early documents written by or about Clare of Assisi are taken from *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, Revised edition and trans. Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap. (New York: New City Press, 2006). Hereafter, all citations will be noted within the text.
3. “Sea Gypsies See Signs In The Waves,” *60 Minutes*, CBS Broadcasting, Inc., March 20, 2005.
4. (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2004), 181.
5. See Clare Marie Ledoux, *Clare of Assisi: Her Spirituality Revealed in Her Letters*, Trans. Colette Joly Dees (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1996), 2.
6. *Clare of Assisi: A Biographical Study*, Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1993), 83.
7. *Ibid.*, 92.
8. See also the testimonies of Benvenuta of Perugia (*Proc* 2.2), Filippa de Leonardo di Gislerio (*Proc* 3.2), Amata di Martino (*Proc* 4.2).
9. *Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers*.
10. *Proc* 2.22; 12.3; 13.10; 19.2.
11. Ledoux, 10-11.
12. *Proc* 2.2; 19.1.
13. Peterson, 102.
14. See Francis Dorff, O. Praem., *The Art of Passing Over: An Invitation to Living Creatively*, Integration Books (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1988). See especially Part I: On Listening and Hearing Creatively, 9-34.
15. For an interesting study on the distinction between conversion stories presented by male authors as experiences of “liminality” and by female authors as experiences of “continuity,” see Caroline Walker Bynum, “Women’s Stories, Women’s Symbols: A Critique of Victor Turner’s Theory of Liminality,” in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 27-51.
16. See *Testament*, 24-26.
17. *The First Franciscan Woman: Clare of Assisi and Her Form of Life* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1993), 132.
18. *New and Selected Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 114-15.
19. See *The Legend of Saint Clare*, 10.
20. “All neat organizations of the spiritual life are hindsight creations. After events, activities, and people have provoked our spirits to journey to another place, we look back and sort out the chaos into some form of orderly progression. We may even dare to talk about providence. But we should notice that providential interpretations are usually backward looks from a safe place. When events, activities, and people are actually happening, the spiritual life has the “feel” of an insight here, a quandary there, and a sense of being on the verge of something everywhere. . . . in the spiritual life the mind is often the last to know.” See *Starlight: Beholding the Christmas Miracle All Year Long* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 14-15.
21. *The House of Belonging* (Langley, Washington: Many Rivers Press, 2002).
22. *Franciscan Prayer*, 138.
23. See Marco Bartoli, *Clare of Assisi*, Trans. Sister Frances Teresa, O.S.C. (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1993), 76-97.
24. From personal correspondence, February 23, 2006.
25. *LegM* 2.1. All citations from the early documents written by or about Francis of Assisi are taken from *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, Eds. Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap., J. A. Wayne Hellman, O.F.M. Conv., William J. Short, O.F.M. (New York: New City Press, 2000). Hereafter, all citations will be noted within the text.
26. Bartoli, 87.
27. Peterson, 164.
28. See *Testament*, 2-3. In contrast, see Francis’ *The Testament*, 1-3.
29. Delio, 130.
30. *Ibid.*, 128.
31. Ledoux, 55.
32. *Hinds Feet on High Places* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1975), 184-87.

### Introduction

Franciscan prayer is neither a new nor overlooked topic, and one might wonder about the necessity or even value of another article addressing the matter. There are already both bountiful and helpful resources on the subject that laudably explore the fundamental characteristics and essentials of Franciscan prayer.<sup>1</sup> Central to the contributions of such works is their guidance in uncovering what it means for twenty-first century believers to pray as Franciscans. This is a critical issue for those of us who follow the Franciscan path of brother-sisterhood. Two ecclesial issues, however, prod us to a different approach.

First is the obvium that all Roman Catholics and further, all Christians, do not follow a Franciscan path. While this is not new information, it is nonetheless an important datum. Sometimes those of us wed to a particular Catholic-Christian religious charism are prodded by a basic extinct to export that charism to others, and initiate them into the spiritual journey we call Franciscan, or Ignatian or Salesian. Yet, the call to holiness for the baptized, freshly articulated in *Lumen Gentium* (e.g., n. 39), finds its central hermeneutic in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* that lifts up the church’s public worship as the font of summit of holiness. Thus it is the church’s liturgy, rather than some particular religious charism, that is to “[move] the faithful filled with ‘the paschal sacraments’ to be ‘one in holiness’” (n. 10).

A parallel ecclesiological perspective is that Franciscans — like every other group of religious in the Church — are not called to live or minister or pray by themselves or for themselves, but with and for the church in service of the world. Francis himself was lauded as a *vir catholicus*,<sup>2</sup> and the women and men who bear his name must embrace a similarly “catholic” perspective on our charism. Thus, an important focus is not so much “how” do or should Franciscans pray as much as, what is the contribution of Franciscan prayer to the Church’s *communio*? As the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrate Life and Societies of Apostolic Life has summarized, “Vatican II affirmed that religious life belongs ‘undeniably’ to the life and holiness of the church and placed religious life at the very heart of the church’s mystery of communion and holiness.”<sup>3</sup> Thus our own questions around Franciscan prayer need to be motivated by a fundamental concern that they contribute to the church’s *communio* and be conceived within the context of that *communio*.

But out of what vision of church, out of which “communion ecclesiology” should we consider our contribution, for the term is certainly not univocal.<sup>4</sup> Some who espouse a vision of Church as a mystery of communion do so with a centripetal bias. This is apparent from the fact that some communion ecclesiologies seem to be lacking any “communion missiology.” But the church was not called into being for its own sake, and is not sustained by the Spirit of Jesus Christ for self-preservation. Rather, as Vatican II clearly stated and Pope John Paul II reiterated, the “Church is missionary by its very nature.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, in the words of Paul Lakeland,

*we must reiterate the symbiosis of communion and mission. While communion can be a cozy notion upon which to meditate, the validity of the particular expression of communion in the church is to be found in the quality of the same community’s commitment to its mission. The praxis of communion is visible in the church’s faithfulness to its mission; the praxis of mission is directly connected to the understanding of communion. If what we mean by “communion” is an inward-looking, self-congratulatory, and fearful huddling together against the forces of modernity . . . then “mission” will mean little more than the periodic excoriation of the “outside” world. But if communion means a generous and loving association of free and faithful children of God, then the dynamic excess of love, without which it is not love at all, spills over into a mission to the whole human race, one marked by a generous sharing of the knowledge that God wills to save the world.<sup>6</sup>*

This is a communion ecclesiology which clearly resonates with the nature of religious profession.<sup>7</sup> As made abundantly clear in the *Instrumentum Laboris*, proceedings, and postsynodal exhortation from the 1994 special Synod on Consecrated Life, the call to mission is an essential part of every form of communal consecrated life.<sup>8</sup> My own Franciscan community, almost 16 years prior to that Synod espoused a similar view, noting that, “The Franciscan life-plan according to the gospel implies, at its root, a natural apostolic dimension without limits”; and, again “Fundamentally every Franciscan vocation is missionary.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, it seems appropriate to consider the contribution of Franciscan prayer not from an intra-Franciscan perspective, but rather from an ecclesial vantage point with a strong and coherent missionary trajectory that redounds not only to the benefit of the Christian Churches, but erupts in mission to the whole human family.<sup>10</sup>

While there are many ways one could proceed with this inquiry, we have chosen to mine the tradition here, particularly selected prayer practices of Francis of Assisi. It is hoped that by examining key worship patterns of Francis, with an eye toward discerning how they contributed to the building up of not only a fledgling community, but also the wider church, we might gain some insights about how Franciscan prayer today might analogously contribute to the Church's *communio* and *missio* in this new millennium. While we could examine Francis' prayer patterns according to their liturgical genres (e.g., Eucharist, Liturgy of the Hours, etc.), we will instead access this prized stratum of the Seraphic tradition through the prism of key characteristics that seem to permeate his vision of prayer for himself and his followers. The challenge here, is that since Francis was one of those charismatic figures who lived and thought and prayed outside the given frameworks of his or any day, it is important to respect the polyphonic nature of his charism. In an attempt to do that, we will propose three compound images that hopefully will capture something of the richness of his prayer spirituality.

### **Communal and Accessible**

Francis lived in a period marked by the growing privatization of the Church's liturgy, increasingly shaped for execution by the ecclesial elite. The celebration of private Mass, a phenomenon already known in the Carolingian period,<sup>11</sup> was not the preferred form for Eucharist as it emerged in the eighth and ninth centuries and was often critiqued. The late ninth century *Interpolated Rule of Chrodegang* decrees that "no priest should presume to celebrate Mass alone, since we can find no authority for this practice."<sup>12</sup> In this spirit Peter Damian (d. 1072) noted that "this sacrifice of praise is offered by the whole faithful, not only men but also women."<sup>13</sup> By the early thirteenth century, however, private Mass had become normative, an important personal spiritual exercise for many clerics, and an font of virtually irreplaceable income for clerics. Similarly, the private recitation of the Divine Office was increasingly common, as demonstrated by the growing ease with which communal recitation of the Office was dispensed,<sup>14</sup> as well as the multiplication of breviaries in this period.<sup>15</sup>

In this wider ecclesial context, Francis' concern for prayer that was both communal and accessible is notable. This is not to suggest that Francis himself was not given to long periods of personal prayer, for it is reported that he spent significant portions of each day and night in prayer.<sup>16</sup> As noted above, one cannot be reductionistic about Francis' spirituality in general, or prayer life in particular, so there are multiple prayer vectors discernible in his life and teachings, which are at least paradoxical. At the same time, one can detect clear trajectories or flows<sup>17</sup> in his vision for a common life that evoked a parallel vision for common prayer that was open to the humblest of God's creatures. One undoubted influence in Francis' own life shaping this vision was that he came to community life as a lay person, not a cleric. While he and his first followers were granted tonsure by Pope Innocent III, making them minor clerics,<sup>18</sup> and while Francis was ordained deacon sometime before 1223,<sup>19</sup> his own conversion and subsequent gathering of followers was much more in the style of a lay movement and retained that characteristic well into the second decade of the thirteenth century.

As a consequence, the prayer style of Francis and his early followers was not in service of some overriding institution vision, turned in on itself in a spirit of self-preservation, tied to some established horarium, in any way privatized or reserved for the *literati* or elite. On the contrary, in a full embrace of poverty and simplicity, Francis led his followers in prayer styles that required no books, no buildings,

no liturgical artifacts and little learning. This is illustrated by various episodes in the life of Francis and his followers. For example, when Francis first began to attract followers and when the brothers asked Francis to pray "because . . . they did not know the church's office," Celano reports that Francis instructed them to pray the *Pater noster*<sup>20</sup> and his favored acclamation "We adore you,"<sup>21</sup> a popular verse widely employed in the Offices of the day.<sup>22</sup> Such a prayer style was portable, open to both the literate and illiterate, lay and clerical followers, did not rely on any material resources, and was a shared eucharological vernacular. Because there were no early Franciscan "texts" to pray nor Franciscan *ordo* to follow, Francis and his followers could happily join with others — clerics or monks or lay — in various forms of prayer including the Divine Office and the Eucharist.<sup>23</sup> This did not jeopardize his vision of prayer. Rather, drawing upon the prayer resources of others could be understood as symbolic of the minority and itineracy which he embraced, and wished to bequeath to his brothers and sisters.

Even when things did change and the brothers acquired their own places,<sup>24</sup> were required to pray the breviary,<sup>25</sup> and Eucharist was clearly part of the daily horarium, Francis consistently seemed to value communal over individual prayer for the brothers. His *Rule for Hermitages*, for example, offers a contemplative image of shared life that is yet structured around the celebration of the Divine Office.<sup>26</sup> Clearly the hermitage image here is in service of fraternity. When it came to his own recitation of the Office, at the end of his life Francis — attempting to adjust to the growing canonical requirements for the cleric brothers in the recitation of the office — himself asks that he might always have a cleric brother with him to pray the office.<sup>27</sup> In so doing, Francis seems to emphasize that having a breviary<sup>28</sup> or even being sick did not excuse one from a prayer that was essentially communal.

As for the Eucharist, in *A Letter to the Entire Order* Francis directs the brothers "to celebrate only one Mass a day according to the rite of the Holy Church in those places where the brothers dwell. But if there is more than one priest there, let the other be content, for the love of charity, at hearing the celebration of the other priest."<sup>29</sup> While there is some disagreement about the interpretation of this passage, given Francis' concerns about poverty and humility, it seems credible to interpret the passage as a rejection of the commonplace practice of multiplying Masses with their accompanying stipends, and a valuing of the conventual over private Mass for the good of the fraternity. This was not a vision that always prevailed, and with the growing clericalization of the order came parallel currents that both emphasized private prayer, and required the cleric brothers to perform prayer in language and style that was no longer accessible to the unlettered. While concessions in this direction had already taken place in Francis' lifetime, they seemed to contradict the early vision that prayer among his followers was a shared, accessible event that contributed to the building up of the community.

The contemporary contribution here is at least twofold. From the viewpoint of *communio*, the prayer vision of Francis that is both communal and accessible has great resonance with the liturgical vision of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* of the Second Vatican Council which insisted that the reform rites of the church, "should be distinguished by a noble simplicity. They should be short, clear, and free from useless repetitions. They should be within the people's powers of comprehension, and normally should not require much explanation" (n. 34). This vision is in service of the overriding goal of the liturgical reforms that "all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy, and . . . in the restoration and promotion of

the sacred liturgy . . . is the aim to be considered before all else" (n. 14). While Francis' vision for prayer was wider than what we would today consider under the rubric of "liturgy,"<sup>30</sup> his prayer praxis and spirituality nonetheless contributes to the *communio* of the contemporary church by anticipating and supporting key aspects of the liturgical vision embedded in the Second Vatican Council. In so doing, Francis' prayer vision implicitly critiques any approaches to prayer which would emphasize the arcane, gnostic, or personalistic.

Besides contributing to the *communio* of the Church, this vision also contributes to and supports the *missio* of the Church. In particular, a prayer vision that is accessible and communal is resonant and in solidarity with that of a multitude of Abrahamic believers — Jews, Christians and Muslims — whose prayer and ritual instincts gravitate more to the shared than the privatized in prayer. Whether the analogue is the minyan for the Amidah,<sup>31</sup> the call from the minaret of a mosque by the muezzin for one of the prescribed canonical prayers (*salat*),<sup>32</sup> the baptized gathered at Vespers or the Sunday eucharistic assembly, each ritual paradigm asserts the centrality of the community, and implicitly affirms the assembly as the ground of prayer. Such resonance is particularly important in those cultures whose inclinations are more sociocentric than egocentric. For Euro-Americans, steeped in an egocentric world view, ceding primacy to the communal nudges us to closer solidarity not only with our Jewish and Islamic sisters and brothers, but also with a growing number of Christians and Catholic Christians whose cultural prejudice is more towards "We are, therefore I am," rather than "I think, therefore I am."<sup>33</sup> Finally, such communal and accessible prayer instincts provide a potent critique to the flows of individualism and elitism that have become part of the globalizing trends of the twenty-first century.

### **Incarnational and Ecological**

Our second compound image for considering the contribution of Francis' prayer to the church's *communio* and *missio* is rooted in the embodied and creational flow in his prayer and spirituality. Reminiscent of the language of Jesus, which was marked by vivid and realistic examples of fig trees, mustard seeds and lost coins,<sup>34</sup> Francis' prayer vocabulary was clearly rooted in this world. While Francis' own life was marked by many mystical experiences, and he was graced with the most intimate of contemplative experiences with the Holy One, his prayer language shows a marked preference for incarnational and ecological images. This prayer trajectory had much in continuity with certain cultural-liturgical trends of his era. Under the influence of what James Russell labels "Germanization,"<sup>35</sup> the Middle Ages witnessed the rise of a more magico-religious interpretation of Christianity and its rituals. One result of such Germanization was increased focus on the objects and elements employed in worship.<sup>36</sup>

Various religious objects and liturgical elements were significant catalysts for Francis' own prayer. Multiple are the prayer stories of Francis before a crucifix. His own "Prayer before a Crucifix" was reportedly composed in praying before the Crucifix at S. Damiano.<sup>37</sup> When teaching the brothers to pray during the early years of the community, Celano reports that whenever they saw a cross "or the sign of a cross, whether on the ground, on a way, in the trees or roadside hedges" they would prostrate on the ground, and repeat the acclamation Francis had taught them, "We adore you, Lord Jesus Christ, in all your churches throughout the whole world and we bless You because by Your holy cross You have redeemed the world."<sup>38</sup> Celano reports that they would do a similar thing whenever they would even glimpse a church from a distance.<sup>39</sup>

Francis' religious imagination, as revealed in his praying, displays another Germanizing tendency that corresponds to this incarnational-ecological motif, and that is what Russell dubs a dramatic-representational interpretation of scripture and liturgy.<sup>40</sup> Two prayer practices of Francis are particularly resonant with this tendency. The first is his Office of the Passion.<sup>41</sup> According to Gallant and Cirino, this Office was not composed by Francis as much as it evolved over many years, a series of disparate elements that gradually came together creating this "unique form of prayer."<sup>42</sup> Rooted in Francis' profound devotion to the whole of the paschal mystery whose center point was the cross,<sup>43</sup> and demonstrating his broad scriptural memory and special facility with the psalms, the office is divided into five parts: 1) Triduum and weekdays through the year, 2) the Easter season, 3) Sundays and principal feasts, 4) Advent, and 5) Christmas and Epiphany. The most complete section is the first in which, particularly resonant with the previously noted Germanizing tendencies, five of the hours broadly relate to particular episodes of Christ's passion, death and resurrection: 1) Compline, the prayer and arrest in Gethsemani; 2) Matins, the trial before the Sanhedrin; 3) Terce, the appearance before Pilate; 4) Sext, the agony and suffering; 5) None, the Crucifixion.<sup>44</sup> Prime appears as a morning interlude, celebrating the morning sun as a symbol of Resurrection, and Vespers as an acclamation of Christ's victory.<sup>45</sup> Together, these hours could be considered a kind of eucharological tableau or dramatic allegory of Christ's passion, death and resurrection. In Francis' development of the crèche<sup>46</sup> he moves even further with a key moment in our salvation history, no longer content with allegorical presentation but instead progressing to fully formed representation.

While Francis' Office of the Passion and development of the crèche are considered here under the rubric of incarnational-ecological, one cannot narrow the incarnational lens to the point that it appears as synonymous with the Christological. There has been much written about Francis' prayer as essentially Christological, yet there is a strong Trinitarian strand in Francis' prayers, in which the communion of the Father and the Son in the Spirit is repeatedly honored.<sup>47</sup> To assert, therefore, that Francis' prayer reveals an incarnational-ecological bias does not mean that it is in any way narrowly focused on Christ's own incarnation, but more broadly embraces the incarnational mystery of God's action in the world throughout the whole of salvation history — what Rahner calls the "liturgy of the world"<sup>48</sup> — that culminates in the living, dying and rising of the Son of God.

It is this broader sense of the incarnational that compels us to link it with the ecological, suggesting that the world is not simply a venue for God's self-revelation, but creation itself is such a self-revelation. The classic manifestation of this in Francis' prayer compositions is his "Canticle of the Creatures."<sup>49</sup> Inspired by the biblical model found in the *Benedicite* (Dan 3:52-90), Francis crafted a distinctive prayer in which brother and sisterhood resonates throughout all of creation. While there are philological debates about the exact meaning of this hymn, Pozzi believes that grammatical analysis reveals a prayer in which creation itself possesses an inherent ability to praise God.<sup>50</sup> It is not each isolated element of creation which lauds God, however, and God does not seem to be praised by the creatures we see and touch, but rather is praised "by the mutual harmony of the energies that make up our visible world. In modern terms we would speak of elementary particles, atoms, molecules, cells, and so forth. It is here that God's wisdom is supremely manifested; here is rooted the act of praise."<sup>51</sup> Similar are his "Praises to be said at all the Hours."<sup>52</sup> In this prayer a vast horizon of a cosmic choir unfolds as "Francis seems to envision himself as the voice of the cosmos, which praises the Creator and Redeemer on behalf of and together with all other creatures."<sup>53</sup>

While Francis' incarnational-ecological tendencies resonate with parallel currents in Medieval Christian Europe, there are two characteristics of his prayer and ritualization that demonstrate a clear separation from the trends of his time. The first is the predominance of praise rather than petition in his prayer, especially that prayer marked by what we have characterized as the incarnational-ecological. The opposite tendency characterized much of the individual and collective prayer forms of medieval Christianity. The threat of final judgment loomed large for medieval Christians, symbolized by its ubiquitous depiction on tympanums over church portals throughout Europe. Writing of late medieval Christianity, Eamon Duffy suggests that most Christians hoped for salvation, but thought that only saints went to heaven directly. Consequently it was purgatory rather than hell that became the focus of Christian fear.<sup>54</sup> This fear revealed itself in many prayer patterns of the Middle Ages, marked by penitential psalms, *psalmi familiares*, Offices of the Dead, and especially Masses for the Dead. Francis' prayer language, however, does not dwell on the petitioner, but rather is marked by words like praise, honor, exalt, adore, bless and give thanks. Bonaventure aptly describes Francis as a "praiser and worshipper of God,"<sup>55</sup> whose unshakable confidence in divine providence moved him to praise rather than petition.<sup>56</sup> Unlike many coreligionists of his day. A second divergence between Francis' incarnational-ecological approach and those of many other medieval Christians under the Germanizing influence is that Francis' respect for and even love of things of this world were never a substitute for an intimate relationship with God and ethical living. Thus, Francis never seemed persuaded by what Russell characterized as a magico-religious interpretation of prayer or worship.<sup>57</sup> On the contrary, his radical embrace of poverty disallowed any element to come between himself and the Holy One or disable him for offering due reverence to all of his sisters and brothers. Furthermore, it could be argued that it was this abiding commitment to poverty which fueled Francis' preference for praise over petition, as it is the former which "is the prayer par excellence that flows out of an experience of total poverty of self."<sup>58</sup>

As for the contributions of Francis' unique incarnational-ecological prayer approach to *communio* and *missio*, several come to mind. First is the rich resonance here with a church which defines itself sacramentally (*Lumen Gentium* 1), and fundamentally embraces the "sacramental principle." As Richard McBrien summarizes,

*"Catholicism has never hesitated to affirm the 'mysterious' dimension of all reality; the cosmos, nature, history, events, persons, objects, rituals, words. Everything is, in principle, capable of embodying and communicating the divine. . . . There is no finite instrument that God cannot put to use. On the other hand, we humans have nothing else apart from finite instruments to express our own response to God's self-communication."*<sup>59</sup>

More recently David Tracy has argued theologically<sup>60</sup> and Andrew Greeley attempted to prove empirically<sup>61</sup> that Roman Catholics have a distinctive sacramental imagination. This is an imagination that believes that God continuously self-discloses through the created world, and thus renders worship both accepting of and inclined toward utilizing the things of creation and produced from creation (e.g., water, bread, wine, oil, candles, statues, etc.) at the heart of worship. Francis thus provides a traditional and accessible affirmation of this basic sacramental principle. His prayer instincts draw Roman Catholics through the incarnational-ecological principle back to the heart of their faith while simultaneously grounding them in a real world populated by real people facing real ethical dilemmas. Catholic-Christianity is not a disembodied faith journey that beckons us to *fuga mundi*, but is

sacramentally committed to a church in history, that must grapple with the ethical issues of the day.<sup>62</sup>

A second contribution of the incarnational and ecological in Francis' prayer to both *communio* and *missio* is the connection between these and major theological flows within Catholicism and Christianity as well as across the major world religions. Within Roman Catholicism, there is a growing awareness that those of us who embrace a sacramental principle need to attend to embodiment in our prayer.<sup>63</sup> Though it is not much acknowledged, the very Eucharist rite at the center of our worship is both embodied and fundamentally ecological.<sup>64</sup> And as Eucharist is the fount and summit of our *communio* and *missio*, the ecological cast of our worship reminds us that the incarnational-ecological, the embodied in humankind and creation is a basic ecclesiological issue.<sup>65</sup> Being a Church in the world means attending to the concrete and particular embodiment of the baptized in particular contexts. Thus issues of gender, physical ability and disability, sexuality, and other incarnational aspects of our lives lie at the very heart of what it means to be Church, and cannot be ignored or marginalized.

More broadly across Christianity, in 1990 the World Council of Churches moved the ecological agenda in a significant way by placing the theme "the integrity of creation" at the heart of their world convocation that year.<sup>66</sup> Their affirmation that creation is "beloved of God," mirrors Francis' invitation to engage in cosmic praise and thanksgiving. His incarnational-ecological prayer instincts not only resonate with currents operative among today's Christians, but are affirmed in the multitude of eco-theologies which Robert Schreiter considers one of the major theological flows of the twenty-first century across the world's major religions.<sup>67</sup>

At the same time, Francis' profound sense of poverty and total dependence on God provides a strong critique to church and world regarding the rampant flows of human exploitation and consumerism which increasingly characterize our globalized economy. Neither the human body nor the biosphere we inhabit are to be manipulated for individual or corporate gain. Here the incarnational-ecological harmonizes with the previous compound image of communal-accessible, reminding us that engagement with the things of this world are for the sake of the common good. Thus Francis' incarnational-ecological vision, filtered through the lens of poverty, eschews profiteering and exploitation, critiques the petitioner "give me" mentality all too prevalent today and, instead, calls us to the most profound gratitude for God's unbounded goodness that encourages a spirituality of detached thanksgiving.

#### **Passionate-Lyrical**

Our third compound image for accessing the contribution of Francis' prayer to church and world highlights the heartfelt and the poetic. Francis is often remembered as an affective, lyrical and dramatic individual.<sup>68</sup> Celano's first description of Francis is rich in corroborating images, noting him to be "an object of admiration to all . . . [who] endeavored to surpass others in his flamboyant display of vain accomplishments: wit, curiosity, practical jokes and foolish talk, songs, and soft and flowing garments."<sup>69</sup> The frequent caricature of Francis as a romantic is grounded in his well documented chivalrous reverie, first about noble acts that would bring him glory in this world, and ultimately about choosing as a bride a Lady called poverty<sup>70</sup> as befitting a herald in service of a new King.<sup>71</sup>

On the one hand, Francis' rich affectivity could be dismissed simply as a personality trait, born of a sensitive soul raised in the troubadour spirit of a privileged merchant class.<sup>72</sup> Closer examination, however,

suggests that passion was not simply a random genetic inheritance but a mature choice, intimately wed to his incarnational instincts fired in the crucible of Lady Poverty. Religious commitment and prayer for Francis were marked by unrestrained abandon, which required both complete interior commitment and a consonant public enactment. Thus, Francis did not simply tell his father that he was willing to renounce all rights of inheritance, he publicly stripped himself bare and handed his clothes back to his father.<sup>73</sup> When his superior wanted to sew fur into his habit because he was so cold and ill, Francis allowed it only if he sewed the fur on the outside as well.<sup>74</sup> When celebrating the feast of the Nativity, he would kiss images of the baby's limbs, stammer sweetly as a baby, and even though the feast would fall on a Friday and require abstinence, proclaimed that he wanted "even the walls to eat meat on that day, and if they cannot, at least on the outside they [should] be rubbed with grease!"<sup>75</sup> When he was concerned that he might be misleading the people for abstaining when he was actually eating meat in secret, he had himself stripped and dragged before the people with a rope tied around his neck in imitation of common criminals.<sup>76</sup> And as he progressed in the complete abandonment of self to Christ crucified, the drama eventually played itself out on his own body in stigmata.<sup>77</sup> It is not surprising that Celano describes Francis as "a man of great fervor."<sup>78</sup>

The paradox of such dramatic abandon is the way it so often expressed itself lyrically and joyfully. Passion for Francis did not translate into anything dour as though his only passion was for misery. Rather, his fundamental stance in gratitude and instinct for praise over petition, seemed to sustain him in joy. Prototypical is Celano's description of Francis before the Pope and cardinals, "speaking with such fire of spirit that he could not contain himself for joy. As he brought forth the word from his mouth, he moved his feet as if dancing, not playfully but burning with the fire of divine love, not provoking laughter but moving them to tears of sorrow."<sup>79</sup> True and perfect joy for Francis, as was made clear to Br. Leo,<sup>80</sup> was not some fleeting feeling or spontaneous affect, but a spiritual stance and gospel resolve.

Francis was not only born in the age of troubadours, he adopted and purified the troubadour spirit. His limitless confidence in God and complete lack of self-consciousness transformed him into a unique minstrel. His passion for the God whom he continuously praised begot a self-effacing genre of hymnody. Some of these texts have come down to us, such as the "Praises to be said at all the Hours,"<sup>81</sup> the "Praises of God,"<sup>82</sup> and the "Canticle of the Creatures."<sup>83</sup> These exemplars do not, however, define or exhaust the lyricism of this mystic whom Celano recalls would "pick up a stick from the ground, and put it over his left arm while holding a bow bent with a string in his right hand, drawing it over the stick as if it were a [fiddle]"<sup>84</sup> as he sang about the Lord. Thus, the *Assisi Compilation* could note how the "sweet melody of the spirit bubbling up inside him would become on the outside a French tune."<sup>85</sup>

Francis' passion and lyricism were contagious. Notable in this regard is Celano's description of the canonization of Francis. Not only were the people filled with joy, but Celano describes the pope as one who "rejoiced and exulted, dancing with joy."<sup>86</sup> That others would participate in and continue his legacy of spiritual passion and perfect joy does not appear to be purely coincidence, for Francis is well remembered as one who intentionally instructed others in this legacy. Notable in this regard is the passage in the *Mirror of Perfection* in which he rebuked a brother who looked sad: "This sadness is a matter between you and God. Pray to Him, that by His mercy He may spare you and grant your soul the joy of salvation of which it was

deprived by the guilt of sin. Try to be joyful always around me and others, because it is not fitting that a servant of God appear before his brothers or others with a sad and gloomy face."<sup>87</sup> Francis himself was not always capable of fulfilling this vision. Sometimes, for example, when contemplating the poverty of the blessed Virgin and her Son, he would groan "with sobs of pain, and bathed in tears . . . [eat] his bread on the naked ground."<sup>88</sup> As a mystic with a rich affective life, Francis was both capable of and experienced in expressing the range of human emotions. At the same time, a trajectory of disciplined and sustained joy flowed through his life.

More broadly, it is useful to consider Francis as someone who, throughout the whole of his life, dramatically instructed and initiated others into his passion, joy and lyricism. Laura Smit considers this a form of "aesthetic pedagogy." She writes,

*[Francis is] concerned to illustrate a way of life, not with mnemonic devices, but with his entire being. He is a teacher in the sense that the Hebrew prophets were teachers, or that Socrates was a teacher, or that Gandhi was a teacher. His life is the lesson. The virtuous life which he wishes to communicate is the life of Christ. So he takes on the persona of Christ, as a role which he plays in the drama of his life. It is not accidental that his followers recognized Francis as "the Mirror of Perfection." His life is meant to be such a mirror. He is a performance artist for whom drama functions pedagogically.*<sup>89</sup>

One dramatic example of this pedagogy for passion occurs in both his earlier and later Rules regarding the care of brothers for one another. Eschewing the disembodied or impassive, Francis instructs his brothers "Let each one confidently make known his need to the other, for if a mother loves and cares for her son according to the flesh, how much more diligently must someone love and care for his brother according to the Spirit."<sup>90</sup> Similarly did he induct his followers into his joy and lyricism.<sup>91</sup>

One of the abiding issues in Christian prayer is that of orthodoxy, and a concern that the prayer both express and create "right belief." While Francis' prayer was certainly orthodox from a doctrinal perspective, he seemed more concerned with orthopraxis, and the absolute continuity between the way he and his followers prayed and the way they lived. Our consideration of Francis' life and prayer as passionate and lyrical, however, further highlights how Francis was also concerned with orthopathy, or "right feeling." For Francis "right feeling" was a disciplined passion through which affect became virtue, and feeling was directed in service of a higher purpose. While intimately linked to the strong incarnational predisposition of his spirituality, this orthopathy is a yet distinctive aspect of his spiritual life and prayer. His affectivity and lyricism were disciplined through poverty so that they only and always served the ultimate goal of uniting him with the God who was both the font and the summit of these gifts.

The contribution of this passionate-lyrical aspect of Francis' spirituality and prayer to the Church's *communio* and *missio* is both rich and paradoxical. For example, Francis' dramatic and exuberant orthopathy provides a vivid example of what is imaged in the opening lines from Vatican II's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts" (n. 1). To be a true follower of Christ is to be fashioned in the image of that Christ who is aptly understood as the compassion of God.<sup>92</sup>