

CLARE IN HER TIME

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IN EARLY THIRTEENTH-CENTURY Europe, in Italy in particular, two main tides of change from the previous century came face to face. These could be regarded as either social and ideological or, more realistically, as an examination of the evidence will show, as economic and spiritual. In this changing world, Clare of Assisi (1193/4–1253) met problems which had now become too difficult to avoid.¹ How could the great additional wealth, created by economic change and demonstrated in the growth of new money, new towns and new trading conditions, be reconciled with the ever more inspiring spiritual ferment also taking place? The wish to follow the Holy Spirit and lead a life following in doctrine and fellowship that of the early apostles was becoming increasingly popular. How could the nobility and merchants of these ever more prosperous towns also serve Christ in such a way? And what consequences would follow if this led them to differ from the views held by the Church of the time, as exemplified by its leader on earth, the pope?

Whilst Francis of Assisi (1182–1226) is the best known example of this challenge,² a greater understanding can be learned from Clare because it was even more difficult for women to respond to the dilemma. The inspirational effect of Francis' personal history did not last far into the thirteenth century. Clare, with her quieter and more diffident approach (a womanly quality or failing), may have had a wider and longer-lasting influence which should not be discounted simply because its effect was felt primarily amongst the women of the time. Clare, at first in the shadow of Francis, where she eagerly followed the example of his way of life, had a more comforting and inspiring influence because of her empathy towards the problems of women.³ Her influence also lasted for a longer period, and this was not merely because she outlived Francis by nearly a generation. Many were to treasure her letters, and those who received gifts of personal items which Clare herself had used felt her blessing.

The *Forma vitae*⁴ written by Francis for Clare's community, although received with gratitude, indicated that those women who embraced the life of the religious under his auspices were to have limited scope for movement. There was, therefore, a need for development of this original

Rule,⁵ which Clare was eventually able to bring about only at the end of her life and from her deathbed.

Clare came from a background which was both socially elevated and wealthy. Within her household were seven knights, all noble and powerful.⁶ Their house was one of the largest in the city with an appropriately grand life-style. Clare hid the food she was supposed to have eaten, afterwards distributing it to the poor of Assisi. Beneath her fine clothes she wore a rough garment and was attested as living in 'a spiritual way', fasting, praying, giving alms and carrying out many other spiritual deeds. As she was then about seventeen or eighteen and very beautiful, her parents wished her to marry in the interests of the family. Clare, however, had fallen under the influence of Francis, whose life-style she greatly admired and who eventually encouraged her to follow her calling to serve God. She responded to him by first selling not only her entire inheritance but also part of that of her younger sister and giving the proceeds to the poor. The outward symbol of her conversion followed, with the cutting of her hair by Francis on Palm Sunday 1212 at Santa Maria de Porziuncula. Immediately afterwards he sent her to the Benedictine convent of San Paolo delle Abbadesse near Bastia, just outside Assisi. As she had no dowry, she must have entered like a servant, in a menial capacity.⁷ Her relatives were at length convinced of her utter resolve when she resisted their violent attempts to break down the convent door and drag her away. She clung to the altar and revealed her shorn head to them as a sign of the religious life she had undertaken. She had left behind all wealth, comfort and home to join, as far as she was able, the life of faith lived by Francis which she found so worthy of emulation.⁸

At the time that Clare reached this turning point in her spiritual life and found the way which she was henceforth to follow, Innocent III (1198–1216) was Pope in Rome.⁹ He at all times was impressed by and sympathetic to the varied forms of popular religious aspiration to the *vita apostolica* which flourished during his pontificate. Amongst these, forms specific to women can be examined under three groupings: the Beguines of Northern Europe, the nuns inspired by Dominic of Caleruega (d.1221) and women led by Clare whose group owed its origin to the charismatic faith and life-style of Francis.

The way of life of the Beguines, religious women first attested c.1170–80 in the diocese of Liège in Brabant, represented a novel alternative to the more traditional cloistered existence of religious women.¹⁰ These urban women lived by no formal rule but singly or in twos or threes in their own houses, supporting each other by mutual

exhortation and practising poverty on the apostolic model. They did not withdraw completely from the world but earned their own living from the work of their hands, thereby obtaining a self-sufficiency not based on an income from property.

In Southern Europe, the situation was very different. In 1206 at Prouille in the diocese of Toulouse, Dominic, with the support of Bishop Fulk (1206–29),¹¹ founded a convent for the daughters of the impoverished lesser nobility of the Languedoc. There they might be instructed to withstand heretical tendencies, particularly those coming from the Cathars. It was in similar circumstances but with a rather different outcome that the followers of St Clare were to find a role.

As with all the outpourings of faith which came to his attention, Innocent III dealt with each of these communities in ways consistent with his office, his own faith and with the particular needs of the women themselves.¹² As far as the approval of the Beguines was concerned, we know that Innocent must have agreed to meet and hear one of their spokesmen. First, John de Liro, a popular preacher from the diocese of Liège and one of the Beguines' male protectors, had set out for the Curia late in 1214 or early in 1215 but died in the Alps.¹³ It was therefore left to Jacques de Vitry (1160/70–1240), author of the *Life* of Mary of Oignies (d. 1213), the 'new saint' of the diocese of Liège, to obtain special permission from Innocent's successor, Honorius III (1216–27), for these women to live together, mutually exhorting each other to a more spiritual life.¹⁴ Innocent had died while Jacques de Vitry was travelling to the Curia at Perugia. Mary's *Life* had been commissioned at the express wish of Fulk of Toulouse so that this bishop might demonstrate to the nuns of Prouille the steadfast orthodox lives of their sisters in the North.¹⁵ At Prouille, as at Dominic's later foundation of San Sisto in Rome, Innocent had been much concerned with strict enclosure for the women. Indeed, Dominic was to send four sisters from Prouille to form the nucleus of this new community.¹⁶

The result of Innocent's treatment of Clare, however, must be counted as the most exceptional example amongst these new expressions of female religious life flourishing in the early years of the thirteenth century. The Privilege of Poverty which he gave to her, possibly in Perugia at some time between the end of May and 16 July 1216, was utterly unique in legislation for any community of religious women anywhere.¹⁷ Indeed, so special was it that it was only after delay and most reluctantly confirmed by Pope Gregory IX (1227–41), previously Hugolino, Cardinal Bishop of Ostia (1206–27) and protector of the Franciscan family. Hugolino did this only after he had struggled in

vain to persuade Clare to renounce this path of absolute poverty. This is not to say that Clare and the Poor Ladies of San Damiano did not share similar features with other women attempting new expressions of the religious life.¹⁸ Jacques de Vitry saw great similarities between those Beguines whom he had left behind at Oignies in Brabant, those sisters being protected by his friend, Fulk of Toulouse at Prouille, and the female followers of St Francis gathered around Clare at San Damiano. In his letter of October 1216, he provides the only eye-witness account of the nascent order of Poor Ladies of San Damiano.¹⁹ By then they had multiplied and were living in hospices on the outskirts of several cities, maintaining themselves by the work of their own hands and accepting nothing else. So well regarded was this holy way of life that it brought them more honour, from clergy and laity alike, than they wished to receive.²⁰

With such gospel-inspired movements, there was always danger of heresy. In the general spiritual climate and with the evolution of ecclesiastical discipline, these diverse manifestations of lay piety flickered uncertainly on the boundaries of orthodoxy.²¹ On which side of it they found themselves depended almost as much on the strategy adopted by the popes as on the content of their system of belief. There is no doubt that Innocent III approached the problem similarly and saw that there was a danger of the *vita apostolica* being both spoiled and perverted. He was tolerant of different forms but took the view that certain geographical areas needed different treatment, as the example of the Valle Spoletana shows. After all, it was the area which gave birth to the spiritual explosion of both Francis and Clare and could not be allowed to degenerate into the worst form of heresy.²²

The so-called Valle Spoletana, that is, the plain spreading up from the mountains behind Spoleto to the Chiascio River running between Assisi and Bettona, was an area of particular interest and concern to the early thirteenth-century popes, Innocent himself, Honorius III and Gregory IX (1227–41) because it was such a strong heretical centre. The Valle Spoletana was situated within the confines of the Patrimony of St Peter and thus scarcely a hundred miles from Rome itself. Rainier Sacchoni, writing c. 1250, relates that the Cathar churches of Tuscany and Spoleto numbered one hundred Cathar clergy or *perfecti* alone, not counting novices and simple believers.²³ The nearby heretic strongholds of Orvieto and Viterbo were linked directly to the Valle Spoletana by the via Francigena, the major trade-route north to the Alps. Innocent was sensitive to the political nature of any intervention in the Valle Spoletana. The spiritual well-being of the flock entrusted to him in his

role as Universal Shepherd and Pastor was more significant than temporal intervention. In a letter of October 1199, addressed to the clergy of the Duchy of Spoleto (of which the diocese of Assisi formed an important part), he stressed that whilst not neglecting the supervision of temporal matters he would continue to give proper precedence to the spiritual.²⁴ His attempt to impose spiritual standards on the area resulted in the appointment of a succession of cardinal legates and clerical rectors who enjoyed full delegated powers. Yet even such powerful interventions were to prove insufficient to halt the spread of civil violence and heresy within the cities. It was a recurring problem because it was the most virulent form of heresy.

Innocent was actively opposed to real challenges to the true faith, especially that coming from Catharism, which offered a fully-fledged alternative church. This dualist heresy was a particularly dangerous delusion to women, involving them as it did as clergy or *perfectae* and allowing them to exercise the same clerical functions as their male counterparts.²⁵ The danger of heresy so close to Rome made it necessary for the papacy to go to quite extraordinary lengths to combat the threat thus posed to the flock. In his attempts to fend off this heretical temptation to women, it can be understood why Innocent III so strongly supported Dominic and Francis and took the action he did in regard to the women who followed them.

However, Innocent's use of Clare and her community as a bastion of orthodoxy in the Valle Spoletana differs from his dealings concerning Dominic's foundation in Languedoc, another area where Cathar heresy seriously threatened women. In 1211, this community received the income from the church of St Mary of Prouille so that it could support itself.²⁶ The need for financial security and stability had already been stressed by Innocent when he wrote to the Roman abbesses on 7 December 1204.²⁷ Then he forbade them to sell any more of the lands and properties of their convent in order to gain an income, however small, because such properties were vital for enclosed nuns.

Having regard to the specific problems of the Valle Spoletana and the exceptional relationship of Clare with Francis, Innocent was prepared to allow Clare's unique Franciscan ideal to survive and even to flourish. This ran entirely counter to his own strongly held ideals of the basis for monastic renewal, namely that financial stability was paramount, especially for enclosed women.

The Privilege of Poverty allowed Clare to live a life of complete poverty without any regular income, unheard of for female religious.²⁸ It is clear from the Privilege that the poverty Clare wanted was not

traditional monastic poverty with regular institutional income but like that of Francis, complete poverty, both individual and corporate. The only security she sought was to be from him 'who feeds the birds of the heavens and clothes the lilies of the fields', in whose path she was following. Like St Francis, her poverty was Christocentric, an imitation of the Christ they saw in the gospels: 'You propose not to have any possessions whatsoever, clinging in all things to the footsteps of Him who for our sake made Himself poor'. As Clare told Gregory IX, to be absolved from her vow of poverty would mean being 'absolved from the following of Christ'. Clare's poverty, like that of Francis, was complete and total, so the privilege she desired had to ensure this. Innocent wrote clearly:

Therefore we confirm with our apostolic authority, as you requested, your proposal of most high poverty, granting you by the authority of this letter that no one can compel you to receive possessions.

For women religious to live a life of such extreme poverty was unheard of, and the sense of shock was clearly discernible in the Privilege. Innocent wrote in surprised tones, 'Nor does a lack of possessions frighten you from a proposal of this sort'. Even St Francis appeared to have his doubts and he imposed a novitiate on Clare and her first companions. In her Testament,²⁹ she wrote:

When the Blessed Francis saw, however, that although we were physically weak and frail, we did not shirk deprivation, poverty, hard work, trial or the shame or contempt of the world—rather, we consider them as great delights, as he had frequently examined us, according to the example of the saints and his brothers – he greatly rejoiced in the Lord. And moved by compassion for us, he promised to have always, both through himself and through his Order, the same loving care and solicitude for us as for his own brothers.

In addition to Innocent's own belief in financial stability, he also considered strict enclosure to be vital. Under Dominic's guidance but in conformity with Innocent's plan, the sisters of the convent of San Sisto in Rome were totally enclosed and were not allowed out. Dominic even went so far as to confiscate their keys.³⁰ Hugolino, Innocent's own kinsman, close and trusted colleague and the most senior cardinal bishop, legislated for other groups of religious women in Tuscany in 1219, many of whom had been inspired by Clare's response to Francis.³¹ As their Protector, he imposed on them total and perpetual

enclosure. Even in death, the sisters were to remain within the confines of the convent. Such was the received wisdom of Innocent's pontificate.

To what extent Clare of Assisi was free from enclosure is unclear. The only eye-witness account is Jacques de Vitry's letter of 1216 which clearly shows the community of San Damiano living in hospices rather than convents. Was this enclosure more like that of the Beguines – voluntary and spiritual – rather than the enclosure enforced by legislation as seen at San Sisto and in Hugolino's foundations? Although the constitutions of Hugolino seem to have been followed at San Damiano, their earlier Privilege of Poverty would have meant a different application of it. Certainly in January 1220, Clare felt that she could leave the 'enclosure' to join her martyred brothers in Marrakesh in Morocco, her active mission being prevented only by her ill health.³² Furthermore, in Clare's own Rule, given approval in 1253,³³ it is clear that the enclosure under which Clare had lived for forty years and which she was describing in the Rule was not as total as that prescribed by Hugolino. In Chapter 2 of her Rule, Clare wrote that the sisters were allowed 'to leave the enclosure for a useful, reasonable, evident and approved purpose'.³⁴ Clare's enclosure was spiritual and the community remained stable and permanent but at the same time open – in the world but not of it.³⁵

With these limitations, the influence of Clare had to be spread by the communications she wrote herself and those of others who passed on details of her reputation, life-style and beliefs as the servant of Christ. Some of this is exemplified in the Rule she eventually wrote herself: a decided step forward from the male-contrived Rule of Pope Gregory IX (Hugolino) and even an improvement on that of the generous and understanding Francis, who nevertheless wished to limit Clare and her followers to a very narrow range of women's interests, possibly for their own protection as much as anything else. Hugolino, through fatherly affection, followed the same line, trying to persuade Clare that owing to the 'events of the times and dangers of the world', she should consent to have some possessions.

As for Clare, her mission and witness to other women of her time, based on her personal commitment to the living Christ, following as it did the women of the New Testament, had great influence and bearing on these contemporaries. Many examples of this influence have been related. St Agnes of Prague is one, but there were many others.

Agnes of Prague reveals an interesting aspect.³⁶ An examination of Clare's views in the case of Agnes may lead us to the conclusion that not all religious women were obsessed with the maintenance above all of the physical purity of women, that is, with the retention of virginity,

excluding, of course, the essential purpose of the unique birth of Christ of the Virgin Mary. Clare was a realist as Christ himself had been. Agnes of Bohemia, whose prospective marriage to Frederick II lapsed on the death of her father, felt free to make her own decision not to marry. Clare was full of praise and supported this decision taken by Agnes, not because she was against marriage with its loss of virginity, but because she wanted women to have the right to choose to do with their lives as the Holy Spirit guided them. The choice should not be that of parents, nor of husbands but that of women in response to the Holy Spirit. Unmarried or married, celibate or chaste, all could have in them the elements of the life of faith, and women needed to be able to decide for themselves which way they wished to follow in their personal commitment to Christ.

Clare's spiritual approach was one she shared with Francis, though perhaps she had a deeper understanding of women's interests. It may be true that the Franciscan Order was to depart from Francis' spirit; some say this had occurred by the middle of the thirteenth century. But this is not a charge which could be made against Clare.

NOTES

¹ *Opuscula S. Francisci et scripta S. Clarae* edited by J. M. Bocali and I. Canonici (Assisi, 1978); R. B. Brooke and C. N. L. Brooke, 'St Clare', *Medieval women* (*Studies in Church History*, Subsidia 1), ed D. Baker (Blackwell, 1978), pp 275-87; *Clare of Assisi: early documents* edited and translated by R. J. Armstrong (New York, 1988); M. Bartoli, *Clare of Assisi* (London, 1993).

² C. H. Lawrence, *The friars* (London, 1994) for a scholarly yet accessible treatment of this vast subject.

³ B. M. Bolton, 'Mulieres sanctae', *Studies in Church History* 10 (1973), pp 77-96; G. Dickson, 'Clare's dream', *Mediaevistik* 5 (1992), pp 39-55.

⁴ Armstrong, *Early documents*, pp 243-44.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 60-77.

⁶ G. Abate, *La casa paterna di S. Chiara* (Assisi, 1946).

⁷ Bartoli, *Clare of Assisi*, pp 46-57.

⁸ A. Lainati, 'The enclosure of St Clare and the first Poor Clares in canonical legislation and practice', *The Chord* 28 (1978), pp 4-15, 42-60.

⁹ J. E. Sayers, *Innocent III: leader of Europe* (London, 1994).

¹⁰ H. Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter* (Darmstadt, 1970), pp 208-19; E. W. McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in medieval culture with special emphasis on the Belgian scene* (Rutgers, 1984); B. M. Bolton, 'Daughters of Rome: all one in Christ Jesus', *Studies in Church History* 27 (1990), pp 101-15.

¹¹ S. Tugwell, *Early Dominicans: selected writings* (London, 1982); B. M. Bolton, 'Fulk of Toulouse, the escape that failed', *Studies in Church History* 12 (1975), pp 83-93.

¹² Bolton, 'Daughters of Rome', pp 101-15.

¹³ J. F. Hinnebusch, *The Historia occidentalis of Jacques de Vitry* (Fribourg, 1972), p 285.

¹⁴ R. B. C. Huygens, *Lettres de Jacques de Vitry* (Leiden, 1960), pp 72-3.

¹⁵ *The life of Marie d'Oignies by Cardinal Jacques de Vitry*, translated and edited by M. H. King (Toronto, 1989).

- ¹⁶ Bolton, 'Daughters of Rome', p 115.
¹⁷ Armstrong, *Early documents*, pp 83-4.
¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp 184-240.
¹⁹ *Lettres de Jacques de Vitry*, p 72; Armstrong, *Early documents*, pp 245-6.
²⁰ Brooke, 'St Clare', pp 281-2.
²¹ R. I. Moore, *The birth of popular heresy* (London, 1975), p 99.
²² P. Gerrard, 'Cum magna hilaritate: Innocent III, Cardinal Hugolino and religious women in the Valley of Spoleto', unpublished BA dissertation (1993).
²³ Moore, *Birth of popular heresy*, p 138.
²⁴ *Patrologia Latina (PL)* 214, col 750.
²⁵ M. Barber, 'Women in Catharism', *Reading Medieval Studies* 3 (1978), pp 45-62.
²⁶ R. B. Brooke, *The coming of the friars* (London, 1975), p 184.
²⁷ *PL* 215, col 475.
²⁸ Armstrong, *Early documents*, pp 83-4.
²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp 54-9.
³⁰ Bolton, 'Daughters of Rome', pp 113-5.
³¹ Armstrong, *Early documents*, pp 87-96.
³² *Ibid.*, pp 125-175.
³³ *Ibid.*, pp 60-77.
³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp 62-4.
³⁵ Bartoli, *Clare of Assisi*, pp 88-97.
³⁶ Armstrong, *Early documents*, pp 33-4.