

The Originality of San Damiano.
Some Reflections on the Institutional Origins
of the Order of the Poor Sisters

The Sisters of the Protomonastery of Assisi

Towards the centenary of 2012

The year 2009, commemorating the Eighth Centenary of the foundation of the Order of Friars Minor, inaugurates also the itinerary of preparation for 2012, the anniversary of the foundation of the Order of the Poor Sisters of St. Clare¹. This appointment of grace was noted and outlined in the course of the First International Congress of Federal Presidents, held at Our Lady of the Angels from January 26 to February 6, 2008. In the *Final Message* of the Presidents, a three year itinerary of preparation was proposed based on the various reflections on three of the fundamental aspects of our charism.

- 2009: *Vocation* - content: identity and relationship with the First Order;
means: the rediscovery of the primary sources.
- 2010: *Contemplation* - content: spiritual life, life in Christ;
means: listening, silence and conversion.
- 2011: *In most high poverty* - content: give more importance to the choice of poverty;
minority, expropriation and restitution [to the poor];
means: concrete choices of solidarity.
- 2012: *In holy unity* – The year of the celebration.²

We note in passing that, if it is taken for granted that 2012 be recognized as a jubilee year for the daughters of St. Clare, as occurred already in 1912, the manner of defining the historical motivation for this celebration is not uniform. In the Minister General's address to the abbesses at the International Congress there was mention of "the Eighth Centenary of the birth of your Order,"³ while the final message limits the description of 2012 as the "anniversary of the beginning of the life of St. Clare at San Damiano."⁴ Fr. Carballo, in his *Letter on the Occasion of the Feast of St. Clare 2009*, indicates more explicitly the "anniversary of the foundation of the Order of the Poor Sisters of St. Clare" in 2012. Behind this multiplicity of definitions, there lies a real problem in that one notes a certain dissimilarity between the centenary of the foundation of the Order of Friars Minor that we are celebrating this year and that of the Order of the Poor Sisters, which is yet to come. It is correct to trace the birth of the Order of Friars Minor back to 1209, since the meeting of Francis and his first companions with Pope Innocent III was a decisive moment for the establishment of the new *fraternitas* in the bosom of the Church. Fr. Andrea Boni writes: "It was a matter of accepting a new project of Gospel living (on the

¹ cf. J.R. Carballo, Letter of the Minister General on the Occasion of the Feast of St. Clare 2009.

² *Messaggio* (February 6th, 2008), in *Franciscus et Clara, memoria et prophetia. Acta conventus Praesidium sororum Clarissarum in singulis Foederationibus consociatarum in S. Maria Angelorum - Assisi a die 26 ianuarius usque ad diem 6 februaris 2008 celebrati*, Romae 2008, 201.

³ J.R. Carballo, *The Relationship between the Order of Friars Minor and the Order of St. Clare*, in *Franciscus et Clara, memoria et prophetia. Acta*, 21.

⁴ *Messaggio*, 200.

community level) into the context of the juridical organization of the Church, and of conferring juridical autonomy on the Order of Friars Minor (rights and obligations) as a new ecclesial reality. [...] In that instance, Francis promised obedience to the Pope and the friars promised obedience to Francis. These two elements are at the basis of the ecclesial existence of the Order of the Friars Minor.”⁵ But to speak of the foundation of the Order of St. Clare in 1212 seems rather anachronistic.

The event which we will commemorate in 2012, and with fitting emphasis, is the *conversio* of St. Clare, the beginning of her “doing penance” (cf. RCl 6,1; TestCl. 24), visibly expressed in the outward signs of the tonsure and the habit of penitents received from the hands of Francis at the Portiuncula. While the meeting of St. Francis and his companions with Pope Innocent III had actual juridical - ecclesiastical effects on the little fraternity (it is enough to remember the conferment of the tonsure and the mandate to preach penance), the event of the night of Palm Sunday, 1212 was personal to the life of St. Clare. She passed from the secular state to the religious state in the broad sense. That event, like the gathering of the first sisters in San Damiano, can be recognized in retrospect as only the “seed” of the foundation of the Order of the Poor Sisters.

Aside from these distinctions, the upcoming jubilee of 2012 is, for us Poor Clares, a providential date to be lived with intense gratitude, in order to “be newly visited by the grace of [our] origins, to be able to draw from their memory an evangelical freshness, and to be in history... a credible witness to a God who seeks out humanity with an impassioned love.”⁶ The Minister General never tires of exhorting us to assume “with courage and creativity” the responsibility of guarding the clarian charism “in these delicate and difficult times, but times also so full of possibilities.”⁷ Certainly, the celebration of 2012 will be a fitting occasion to continue deepening our knowledge of our identity as Poor Sisters, as were the jubilee celebrations of the Eighth Centenary of the birth of St. Clare (1993-1994), and the 750th anniversary of her death (2003-2004).

The relationship between the First and Second Order: a facet to be deepened.

One aspect of our charismatic identity which will receive special attention is certainly that of the relationship between the Order of the Friars Minor and the Order of the Poor Sisters. This was the theme of Fr. Jose Rodriguez Carballo’s address at the First International Congress of Federal Presidents.⁸ In it, he proposed some pathways for our reflection which should not be dropped. He said: “...no one branch of the Franciscan Family exists independently from the others, that none exclusively possesses the gift of the charism in order to have others participate in it, but all live it fully, are called to communicate it in fraternal and spiritual exchange. We must, therefore, question ourselves on how we live this complementarity, ask ourselves if this is growing within that reciprocity, in which our charism subsists. We must check if the ways in which we make our ‘holy unity’ visible today are truly a mutual help to live according to the form of the Holy Gospel.” And again... “This charismatic bond which, even in the specific differences, unites Francis and Clare, has come down through the ages and is very much alive

⁵ A. Boni, *Tres Ordines hic ordinat* (Collectio Assisiensis, 26), Santa Maria degli Angeli 1999, 43-44.

⁶ J.R. Carballo, *Letter of the Minister General for the feast of St. Clare 2009*.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ J.R. Carballo, *The relationship between the Order of Friars Minor and the Order of St. Clare*, in *Franciscus et Clara, memoria et prophetia, Acta*, 21-31.

even today between the Poor Clares and the Friars Minor, although it is not defined by specific juridical ties between the two Orders... I think that great progress has been made in this sense since the II Vatican Council, but there is still a lot to be done in some cases. Too often, indeed, the assistance promised by Francis to Clare has been understood by the Friars Minor as a kind of tutelage and, on the part of some Poor Clares, as an effective dependence giving rise to a real interference of the former (friars) in the life of the latter (sisters) . At other times, the just autonomy has led to almost total isolation and independent journeys, reducing the reciprocity between the First and Second Orders to giving each other some services.⁹

In the more recent clarian studies, the importance of Clare as the first woman in the Church to write a Rule for other women was rightly emphasized, but perhaps her charismatic role of initiator, next to Francis, of an autonomous female Order has not been sufficiently insisted upon. The Centenary of 2012 could be the occasion to let shine in all its clarity the proper nature of the Order of Poor Sisters, which has its own precise charismatic - institutional identity within the great Franciscan family. What the Minister General said about the personality of St. Clare can also be said about our Order: “The little plant of St. Francis, in fact, though always remaining at the school of the Saint of Assisi, expressed an absolute originality and irreducibility of her own which guarantees and preserves its identity in reciprocity.”¹⁰ Only by reclaiming our identity, even from the institutional point of view as well, can we develop in all its beauty that relationship of charismatic reciprocity with the other members of the Franciscan family, particularly with our brothers of the First Order. In human experience, the depth of a relationship grows in the measure in which one takes possession of ones own identity and is grateful for it. To blur or dilute our diversity in the name of communion would be to deprive the Franciscan family and the Church of that richness which the Spirit raised up through the evangelical experience of Francis and of Clare, and which the eight centuries of the history of our Order have transmitted to us.

The Intentions of the Founders or the betrayal of our origins?

“*Tres Ordines hic ordinat...*” Already in the *Rhythmic Office* composed by Julian of Speyr¹¹ it is stated that the charismatic inspiration of Francis gave rise to three quite distinct institutional realities, but which were profoundly united by the common aspiration to “live according to the form of the Holy Gospel” (Test 14). It is not our intention here to examine St. Francis’ contribution to the foundation of the three orders, which would be quite complex and require much space. Instead, we wish to dwell on the identity of the “Second Order.” As our premise we pose a question: Is the present juridical configuration of our two Orders (of the Friars Minor and of the Poor Sisters), that which was truly willed by our Founders, or is it the fruit of a process of historical degeneration, a betrayal of our origins which should be remedied today? In other words, was the original intention of Francis and Clare to form a single fraternity within which both brothers and sisters would live the evangelical *sequela* of the Poor Christ in different but complimentary ways?

⁹ *ibid.*, 24, 27, 24-25.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 27

¹¹ Julian of Speyr, *Officium Rhythmicum Sancti Francisci*, in *Analecta Franciscana* X, 383. The testimonies of Thomas of Celano and of St. Bonaventure, together with other later Franciscan historians, are cited in A. Boni, *Tres Ordines*, 23-26, and in the *General Constitutions of the Order of Saint Clare*, art. 120.1

Besides the lack of explicit data supporting this thesis, it seems that to frame the question in this way does not respect a correct theology of charism. The charism of the Founders, insofar as it is an experience of the Spirit, is a dynamic reality, subject to a process of maturation and development at times very complex, “in conjunction with the perennial growth of the Body of Christ.”¹² The gift of the Spirit made to the Church through the founder often goes far beyond the understanding of the one receiving the inspiration at the time of its reception. In the beginning there is only the seed of that which the Spirit wills to bring about through a new form of religious life, which incarnates in the Church of its day some aspect of the mystery of Christ. For this reason it is indispensable to continually return to the initial inspirations of the founders to draw from them the life giving sap that never runs dry. We must never forget that other factors have also contributed to the development of that seed while interacting with the founders actions. These factors are many: perhaps the inspiration of other companions, counsels and decisions of hierarchical authorities, contingent factors which have contributed (even against the will of the founders) to give new direction to the work and life experience which has led to assuming more adequate ways of expressing the charism, and to the shedding of others. It is a historical constant that when an institution passes from its charismatic intuition to its juridical expression, which guarantees its subsistence, there is a phase of experimentation consisting in the search for ways and means to express the *novitas* [originality] of the charism.¹³ It is an encounter which, by integrating Word and events, Spirit and history, charism and institutions, gives flesh to the perennial newness of the Gospel. The beauty of the Christian perspective lies in just such an encounter

In the case of our Order, therefore, we must not only inquire into the initial experience at San Damiano, but we must also turn to that document of singular value which is the *Forma vitae* of the Order of Poor Sisters, in which St. Clare and her sisters expressed their understanding of the charism. It matured and was tested through forty years of community history. And even if the juridical make up of the Order, codified by the Rule and approved by the Apostolic See, was not entirely in conformity with the original idea (if there ever was such an original idea!) what matters is that Clare recognized herself in it and she made it her own.

The first years at San Damiano: towards an institutional differentiation

What exactly Clare had in her heart in those first months of following the Lord Jesus at San Angelo in Panzo and then at San Damiano is difficult to say. Perhaps nothing other than the joy of experiencing the freedom of serving the Lord in “poverty, hard work, trial or shame and contempt of the world” (RCl 6,2). Certainly the relationship with Francis and the friars was very intense, as we can infer from the beautiful autobiographical text of the Testament: “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 and contempt of the world - rather, we considered them as great delights, as he had frequently examined us according to the example of the saints and of his brothers - he greatly rejoiced in the Lord” (TestC, 28). Through the promise of obedience, Clare and her sisters bound themselves to Francis and to his *fraternitas* to lead a penitential life. But there is no valid evidence to prove that the first sisters lived the same life as the friars. From the very beginning, St. Clare’s experience appears as bound to some very precise

¹² *Mutuae relationes* (May 14, 1978), 11.

¹³ cf. S. Buralassi, *Fondazione di un Ordine religioso*, in *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione* IV, Rome 1977, 114.

places, as she herself reminds us in her Testament (30-32). What characterized the life of the sisters right from the outset was the living of the Gospel in poverty and fraternity in a fixed place rather than going out on the streets to preach penance and serve the lowly as the friars did. That the fascination of the example of St. Francis and his first companions was decisive in the evangelical aspiration of St. Clare is patently clear. It cannot be excluded, however, that she was also influenced by the female penitential movement, then very widespread in central Italy, one of the expressions of which was the phenomenon of reclusion. Her choice of Sant' Angelo in Panzo, as a temporary dwelling place after the short stay at San Paolo delle Abbadesse, as well as some elements present in her definitive Rule of 1253¹⁴ can be seen as indicative of this latter influence.

The bestowal of the forma vivendi

In that attentive gaze which observes the sisters as they take their first steps in their evangelical experience, and in that examination under which he places them to see if they are capable of taking on such a hard life, we see a Francis who is extremely cautious and conscious before God of his role to discern their future. Francis asks himself what God wants of these young women and what he and his companions are to do for them. From the sources it seems that it was Francis himself who directed the path of the sisters towards an institutional differentiation from his own *fraternitas*. Let us look again at the Testament of St. Clare. After recalling St. Francis' promise to care for the Sisters as he did for the friars (TestCl, 29), which was his implicit acceptance of the sisters' bond with the fraternity of the Friars Minor since they were moved by the same evangelical inspiration, and recalling the definitive transferal to San Damiano, St. Clare harkens back to a decisive moment, a real milestone in their history: "He then wrote for us a form of life (*postea scripsit nobis formam vivendi*)" (TestCl, 33). As the spiritual guide of the sisters of San Damiano, St. Francis also makes himself their legislator by giving them written instructions which St. Clare will later incorporate into her Rule. She quotes to the letter a key passage regarding the promise of the friars to have care and solicitude for the sisters.¹⁵ Francis does not ask the sisters to follow the same form of life as the friars, the "*proto-regula*" orally approved by Pope Innocent III, but he writes for them their own *forma vivendi* adapted to their own "marian" way of "living according to the perfection of the Holy Gospel." This was to be as "daughters and handmaids of the Most High King, the heavenly Father and spouses of the Holy Spirit," in holy unity and most high poverty. With these lines of Francis, the long legislative journey of the Order of the Poor Sisters begins, which will develop autonomously with respect to that of the Friars Minor.

"who almost forced her": *Clare takes up the government of the Sisters*

Another incident which was still more decisive and was again apparently the fruit of St. Francis' discernment is recorded in the Process of canonization. It is Sr. Pacifica who tells us that

¹⁴ The recitation of the Divine Office *sine cantu*, the perpetual fast, certain elements of enclosure common to female reclusoriums, and the figure of the sisters who serve outside the monastery all point to this conclusion. See Federazione Santa Chiara di Assisi delle Clarisse di Umbria-Sardegna, *Il Vangelo come forma di vita. In ascolto di Chiara nella sua Regola (Secundum perfectionem sancti evangelii. La forma di vita dell'Ordine delle Sorelle povere*, 3), Padova 2007, 168-169; 179; 250-252; 395-397.

¹⁵ cf. RCl 6, 2-5. See Federazione Santa Chiara di Assisi delle Clarisse di Umbria-Sardegna, *Il Vangelo come forma di vita*, 276-294.

“three years after St. Clare had been in Religion, at the prayers and insistence of St. Francis, who almost forced her, she accepted the direction and government of the sisters.”¹⁶ This event which is also referred to in the *Legend* is thus commented upon in the *Iter Storico* of the Federation of Umbria-Sardegna: “The *Legend* takes up the episode from the *Process*, citing it as an example of the humility of St. Clare. Yet, it is interesting to note that this incident is introduced precisely with a reference to the promise of obedience made to Francis. ...There is like a sign of a break that takes place: Clare is solicited by Francis to assume the government of the community, of which until then he had been the director. This passage does not seem to be motivated by the Council’s regulations nor by the will of Clare, but by the will of Francis and from his discernment in regard to a charism which was evolving and being defined little by little.”¹⁷ From then on, the sisters promised obedience to Clare and no longer to Francis. With the *forma vivendi* given by Francis, and the assumption by Clare of the governance of the community with the title of abbess as stated in the *Legend*¹⁸, we find the first traces of the little community’s own physiognomy. It will progressively assume the characteristics of a real Order, while tenaciously remaining in the religious family of St. Francis. “In the monastic context, beginning in the tenth century, *ordo* came to mean ‘an entire organism observing the same regime of monastic life in external discipline and in the liturgy.’ ...Even taking into account the oscillations of meanings where the term *ordo* is concerned, which in every case characterizes a structure with its own norms and organizational structure, the appellation “Order of the Poor Sisters” can be attributed both to the singular monastery of San Damiano as well as to a group of monasteries, juridically autonomous, yet associated to San Damiano by the same observance.”¹⁹

A farsighted discernment

To us it seems reductive to explain the institutional differences between the Friars Minor and the Poor Sisters as a necessity due to historical circumstances, as for example, Fr. Andrea Boni asserts: “In the communitarian organization of their life (*regulare propositum*) the *sorores minores* were not able to be incorporated into the institution of apostolic religious life, since at that time a female apostolic Order was unacceptable, because of the responsibility of the Church to safeguard the fidelity proper to the pact of fidelity contracted with Christ [at profession] (invalidity of an eventual subsequent marriage). At the time of St. Clare, it was still the common practice for women to live either in the family or in the cloister (*aut murum aut maritum*) in order to safeguard their honor. The society of that epoch was not prepared to receive the decision of a woman to dedicate herself to the apostolate of evangelization or to the apostolate of works of charity.”²⁰ What is surprising, rather, is the farsighted discernment of Francis in regard to the sisters. The Saint understood that to help the sisters fulfill their marian vocation of fruitful guardians of the living Word that the friars spread about the world,²¹ it was necessary to have recourse to juridical structures adapted to the stable form of life of the sisters. The structure of an institution of apostolic religious life could not offer this stability. For this reason he agreed to the

¹⁶ *Process of Canonization*, I, 6.

¹⁷ Federazione di Santa Chiara di Assisi, *Una vita prende forma. Iter storico (Secundum perfectionem sancti evangelii. La forma di vita dell’Ordine delle Sorelle povere*, 2), Padova 2005, 28.

¹⁸ *Legend of St. Clare*, 12.

¹⁹ Federazione di S. Chiara di Assisi, *Il Vangelo come forma di vita*, 88.

²⁰ A. Boni, *Tres Ordines*, 88.

²¹ cf. H. Shaluck, in *CTC* 24 (1997) 263, quoted by Fr. J.R. Carballo, *The relationship between the OFM and the OSC*, 27.

structuring of the little fraternity of San Damiano into a “monastery”, belonging from the canonical point of view to the institution of monastic religious life.²² Some years later, not without suffering, he even accepted that they profess the *forma vivendi* of Cardinal Hugolino.²³

Francis supported the “Poor Ladies” of San Damiano in the process of institutional differentiation, on the condition that this did not corrupt the radicality of their “living according to the perfection of the holy Gospel,” the novelty of that living *sine proprio* in common which was defended by the *Privilege of Poverty*. There was a great risk that San Damiano might lose its own “Franciscan” physiognomy along the way, while trying to fit into the traditional structures of female monastic life. Up to his last breath, St. Francis never tired of exhorting the sisters to remain firm in the form of religious poverty they had promised: “I, little brother Francis, wish to follow the life and poverty of our most high Lord Jesus Christ and of His most holy Mother and to persevere in this until the end; and I ask and counsel you, my ladies, to live always in this most holy life and poverty. And keep most careful watch that you never depart from this by reason of the teaching or advice of anyone.”²⁴ The events following the death of the Saint certainly confirm his fears and we know how much Clare had to suffer to keep her community faithful to the evangelical inspiration of St. Francis.

The finish line: the Forma vitae of 1253

The complex historical journey of structuring of the Order of Poor Sisters reached its climax in the *Forma vitae*, which Pope Innocent IV confirmed for the monastery of San Damiano in 1253, after the first approval of Cardinal Rinaldo. The clarian *Forma vitae* was primarily inspired by the approved Rule of St. Francis, but it is an oversimplification to say that it is the “female version” of the Franciscan Rule. As proven in the *Sinossi cromatica*,²⁵ the *Forma vitae* is the matured articulation of the identity of San Damiano. It found its expressive means in multiple preceding and contemporary sources which were then adapted to the particular experience of life at San Damiano over the course of forty years. Therefore, in the text, we find passages from the Rule of St. Benedict, the Hugolinian and Innocentian Rules, the first Rule of Francis and his Testament, the Rule for Hermitages, the 1239 Constitutions of the Friars minor, and even the Second life of Thomas of Celano all intertwined with the original parts written by Clare and ample quotations from the Rule of St. Francis which act as the main thread. There are also implicit references and brief quotations from the Rule of Grandmont, the Rule of the Trinitarians, that of the Order of the Holy Spirit in Saxia and many others. “Like the wise scribe of the Gospel who draws both old and new from his storehouse (cf. Mt 13:52), Clare borrows

²² The process of institutional differentiation between the Order of Poor Clares and that of the Friars Minor cannot be understood outside of the juridical context of medieval religious life. There were three canonically approved forms of religious institutions: the eremitical, the monastic, and the canonical to which was added the apostolic after the IV Lateran Council. And there were three Rules upon which every new rule was to be based according to the type of religious institute: the Basilian Rule, the Benedictine Rule, and the Augustinian Rule, to which was added the Rule of St. Francis of 1223 for apostolic institutes. Evidently, the direction of the community at San Damiano, with its own particular physiognomy, was moving toward the monastic religious life and not the apostolic religious life. Cf. A. Boni, *Tres Ordines*, 17-21; Federazione S. Chiara di Assisi, *Il Vangelo come forma di vita*, 83.

²³ Pope Gregory IX’s letter *Angelis gaudium* to Agnes of Bohemia on May 11, 1238 gives witness to this (text with Italian translation in Federazione di S. Chiara di Assisi, *Una vita prende forma*, 145-148).

²⁴ RCI 6, 7-9.

²⁵ Federazione S. Chiara di Assisi, *Chiara di Assisi e le sue fonti legislative. Sinossi cromatica (Secundum perfectionem sancti evangelii. La Forma di vita dell’Ordine delle Sorelle povere, 1)*, Padova 2003.

from others all that can furnish her with the juridical, spiritual and expressive instruments that serve to codify her experience of the following of Christ. This is the safeguard of fidelity and of a life lived in the furrow of ecclesial tradition. Whenever these instruments fall short or do not prove to be adequate expressions of the peculiar Franciscan identity of the Order of Poor Sisters and of the new charismatic experience which the Order heralds, Clare, without any hesitation modifies, transforms, omits, distances herself, rewrites and invents with an evangelical liberty which is a gift of the Holy Spirit.”²⁶

This shows how the Rule of St. Clare reflects to the highest degree the singular direction which the legislation of San Damiano took as well as its autonomous physiognomy as an “Order” quite distinct from that of the Friars Minor. With the *Forma vitae* of the Poor Sisters the framework of a new reality is defined, which, while preserving some elements of the established monastic tradition, rereads them in the tones of the evangelical - penitential climate of those decades and situates itself with its own juridical autonomy within the specifically Franciscan movement.

An original juridical solution

In the *Forma vitae*, the two poles, which were already present during the first years at San Damiano - the charismatic membership in the *fraternitas* of Francis and the institutional differentiation – **recall one another are evident** from start to finish. St. Clare’s solemn promise is emblematic of this: “Clare, the unworthy servant of Christ and the little plant of the most blessed Francis, promises obedience and reverence to the Lord Pope Innocent and his canonically elected successors, and to the Roman Church. And, just as at the beginning of her conversion, together with her sisters she promised obedience to the Blessed Francis, so now she promises his successors to observe the same obedience inviolably, and the other sisters shall always be obliged to obey the successors of Blessed Francis and Sister Clare and the other canonically elected abbesses who succeed her.” (RCI, 1, 3-5).

On the one hand there is Clare’s awareness of being at the head of an autonomous institution (with quite a different maturity and security than that initial fear she had in assuming the government of the sisters!): “Promising obedience directly to the Pope, Clare recognizes in herself the same authority as Francis had. She does not place herself on the same level as the other friars, but as the head of an Order juridically distinct from that of the Friars Minor, an autonomous institutional entity which is well defined and which has its own legislation.”²⁷ The sisters are bound to obey her and the abbesses who will succeed her, insofar as they have the full canonical authority over the life of the monastery.

On the other hand, Clare passionately confirms that she is the “little plant” of St. Francis and the bond between San Damiano and the Order of Friars Minor inviolable. “If, in the introduction of the *Forma vitae*, Clare solemnly confirms her obedience to the Minister General, it is to reaffirm [...] the identity of San Damiano as a monastery founded by Francis himself and recognized from the very beginning by the Saint as part of his own institution from the charismatic point of view. What Clare is getting at is that the sisters have been bound to the friars from the beginning and they will always want to be. Here it is not a matter of wanting incorporation into the male Order, as explicit obedience to a male superior would seem to suggest. The physiognomy of the “Order” of Poor Sisters excludes this as it had its own

²⁶ *ibid.*, 11.

²⁷ Federazione S. Chiara di Assisi, *Il Vangelo come forma di vita*, 100.

legislation from the beginning, and the text of the Rule itself belies such a stance. The ties with the male Order are to be understood more as a charismatic belonging than a juridical incorporation. Yet they are morally binding because based on a history of numerous decades (“as we have always mercifully had from that same Order of Friars Minor”) and the explicit promise of our common founder, St. Francis. Only by reaffirming this peculiar identity of her Order with respect to the other female monasteries, can Clare ask *de gratia* for the help of a little community of friars: two clerics for their spiritual assistance and two lay brothers for their material needs. The *Forma vitae* of St. Clare thus reunifies the two elements which throughout the entire history of the Order of San Damiano were pursued with different results: strict poverty and the assistance of the Friars Minor. It is not by chance that the only two times that Clare uses the adverb *inviolabiliter*, “inviolably”, is in reference to her desire for an unconditional attachment to two inseparable realities: it is not possible to be Poor Sisters without being bound to the Order of Friars Minor. On this point, Clare, woman of discretion that she was, is uncompromising.”²⁸

The juridical solution which we find in the 1253 Rule is unique and well pondered. It combines the monastery of San Damiano’s direct dependence on the Holy See through the Cardinal Protector, the internal autonomy under the authority of the abbess and the ties of obedience of a spiritual rather than a juridical character with the Order of Friars Minor. In fact, in the text of the *Forma vitae*, we find certain tasks of the Cardinal Protector specified which are obviously juridical in character, while the figure of the Minister General appears only on the occasion of the election of the abbess with a rather imprecise physiognomy.²⁹ Whether this solution was or was not the consequence of those events which tested the relationship between the female monasteries and the male Order³⁰ is not the issue here. What comes to the fore is that Clare was able to find that it safeguarded the essential elements of her form of life. First, the direct dependence on the Pope kept San Damiano in the longstanding tradition of exempt monasteries.³¹ Secondly, obedience to the Minister General strictly bound the community to the male Order, guaranteeing the charismatic unity with the Friars Minor and the “special care and solicitude” promised by Francis, which was assured not only by the fraternity that resided near San Damiano, but also by the noteworthy figure of the visitator, whom Clare wanted to be “always of the Order of the Friars Minor” (RCI 12,1). And finally, the monastic autonomy ensured the contemplative physiognomy of the community by protecting it from undue external interferences. The characteristic of combining and uniting apparently irreconcilable elements is one that is present throughout the entire Rule of St. Clare. Clare knew well that only in this way, “always submissive and subject at the feet of that holy Church, and steadfast in the Catholic faith,” (RCI 12,13) and in the bosom of the Franciscan Order, the life of the sisters would be able to always continue in the authenticity of its evangelical charism.

²⁸ *ibid.*, 108-109.

²⁹ *ibid.*, 199-200

³⁰ On other aspects of the juridical relationship between the monasteries, the Order of Friars minor and the Papacy between the end of the 1240’s to the beginning of the 1250’s, see Federazione di S. Chiara di Assisi, *Il Vangelo come forma di vita*, 105-108. In the *Iter Storico* the authors highlighted that the failure of the Rule of Innocent of 1247 was not due to the permission to accept possessions - this had already been rejected by San Damiano and other monasteries closely bound to her - but to the attempt on the part of the Pope to entrust the jurisdiction of the Order of San Damiano to the Ministers General of the male Order. The monasteries complained of the interference on the part of the friars, even in the temporal order, which the juridical entrustment brought about and they requested of the Pope to be returned to the jurisdiction of the Cardinal Protector. Cf Federazione di S. Chiara di Assisi, *Una vita prende forma*, 99-100; *Il Vangelo come forma di vita*, 107.

³¹ According to the witness of the above cited letter, *Angelis gaudium*, the monastery of San Damiano obtained the privilege of exemption during the pontificate of Honorius III (1216-1227).

Some challenges for the future

Let us return to our original theme, the celebration of the Centenary of 2012. It seems perhaps that the challenge in store for us as Poor Sisters is that of reclaiming our identity in all of its richness and perennial freshness, even from the institutional point of view. Rather than looking to the praxis of other religious Orders, which have clearly had a different historical journey than ours, or thinking of introducing juridical elements that were never part of our legislation, why not try to plumb the depths of the original potential of our history and of our *Forma vitae*?

For us sisters, the memory of the *conversio* of St. Clare and of the beginning of her evangelical adventure, will require a serious evaluation of the quality of our living “according to the perfection of the Holy Gospel” in poverty, minority and holy unity today. We must examine ourselves on the authenticity of our belonging to Christ and to the Church in the form of “living bodily enclosed.” We have to ask ourselves if we truly give God the absolute priority in our daily lives; if the Word of God is welcomed and kept in our hearts after the example of Mary; if it really transforms our lives and permeates our communities, imbuing us with the wisdom of the Gospel. It will also mean asking ourselves with what awareness we live our charismatic membership in the Franciscan family, what is the quality and significance of our relationships with the Order of Friars Minor and with individual friars, and how we can grow in these relationships.

For the friars, the Jubilee of 2012 could be an occasion to come to know better the identity of the Poor Sisters within the Franciscan family and to stand before them with that respectful gaze full of amazement that Francis had before the holy way of working of the Spirit of the Lord in Clare and her companions. What does it mean for the friars today to be faithful to that promise to have always that “special care and solicitude” for the sisters on both a spiritual and material level? What are the most appropriate ways to respond to what Clare asked of the successor of Francis and the entire Order in her Testament, “that they may always help us to progress in serving God more perfectly and, above all, to observe more perfectly most holy poverty” (TestCl 51)? What means are to be promoted to foster growth in communion between the sisters themselves and with the friars, without compromising the demands of the stability and the interior unity of the contemplative life?

All of us, Poor Sisters and Friars Minor, are called to renew our fidelity to the gift of grace with which the Father of Mercies illuminated the heart of Clare through Francis eight hundred years ago. And this will happen by keeping together, as Francis and Clare did, communion and diversity.

Translation by the Poor Clares of Rockford

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