

POVERTY AND CHRISTOLOGY AT SAN DAMIANO (*)

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For Clare and her sisters, poverty was much more than one among many practices adopted by the sisters to structure their life together: poverty at San Damiano bore Christological meaning that was of the very essence of their experience of sisterhood. This essay will analyze the link between poverty and Christology as expressed in the writings that emerged from San Damiano from its origin until the death of St. Clare. First, the Poor Sisters' practice of poverty will be placed in its historical context. Next, Clare's relationship with Francis and the Lesser Brothers will be examined through the lens of poverty and Christology. Following that, the relationship between poverty and Christology will be studied in the *Letters to Agnes*, read as a response to Gregory IX's traditional understanding of the nature and meaning of female religious life. The essay will conclude with some comments concerning Clare's *Form of Life* and *Testament* with regard to this theme.

The Historical Context

The first papal letter published in the *Bullarium Franciscanum* was written by Pope Honorius III on August 23, 1218, and was addressed to Cardinal Hugo, the papal legate in central and northern Italy. Honorius was responding to Hugo who had requested a juridical resolution from the pope for the difficulty that many religious women were experiencing with regard to their commitment to poverty. The letter was not occasioned by a problem experienced at San Damiano or daughter monasteries, though its content would prove significant for the development of these monasteries. The first line of the letter allows us to understand the problem that Honorius was addressing: «Your letter which was delivered to us holds that very many virgins and other women desire to flee the pomp and wealth of this world and make some homes for themselves in which they may live not possessing anything under heaven except these homes and the oratories to be constructed for them¹». What Hugo was requesting from Honorius was the juridical authority to exempt the "homes" (*domiciliis ipsis*) of these women from local authorities, including that of the local bishop. Honorius authorized

¹ HONORIUS III, *Litterae tuae nobis*, in REGIS ARMSTRONG, *Clare of Assisi – The Lady*. Early Documents (New York: New City Press, 2006), 72 (Abbreviated as *Clare: Early Documents*). IGNACIO OMAECHEVARRIA, *Escritos de santa Clara y documentos complementarios*⁵, Madrid, 2004, 39-40 (Abbreviated as OMAECHEVARRIA): "*Litterae tuae Nobis exhibitae continebant, quod quamplures virgines et aliae mulieres, [...] desiderant fugere pompas et divitias huius mundi, et fabricari sibi aliqua domicilia, in quibus vivant nihil possidentes sub caelo, exceptis domiciliis ipsis et construendis oratoriis in eisdem*".

Hugo to accept these foundations “legally as property” (*mandamus, quatenus huiusmodi fundos in ius et proprietatem Ecclesiae Romanae nomine ipsius recipias*) in the name of the church of Rome².

This papal letter witnesses to how central the desire for a life of poverty (*nihil possidentes sub caelo*) was to the religious experience of significant numbers of women, for which the church now needed to develop a new juridical structure. For these women, and women who came before them in the twelfth century, poverty was experienced as essential to the *sequela Christi* long before Francis came onto the stage of history³.

Maria Pia Alberzoni has pointed out that this juridical arrangement was conceded just two years after Honorius III agreed to the protection for the Beguins requested by Jacques de Vitry and for which he had traveled to Italy in 1216, to meet with Innocent III⁴. She noted that there was a connection between Hugo of Ostia and Jacques de Vitry who were students together in Paris in the school of Peter the Chanter who had articulated a justification for lay preaching (*exhortatio*) in the context of the lay apostolic movements of the late twelfth century⁵. Both men were dedicated to the reform of the church and both were sensitive to and supportive of the new spirituality of poverty that was developing, convinced that the forms of absolute poverty lived by these women and men, together with the new importance they attributed to preaching, were essential to the reform of the church. Alberzoni argues that the positions taken by these men, and others as well, including Innocent III himself, were elaborated and diffused from the theological school of Paris, which worked to defend these new ideals of apostolic life⁶. Jacques de Vitry’s encomium of the “sisters minor” whom he encountered in the vicinity of Perugia in 1216, is a clear example of his own sensitivity to this new phenomena. He wrote that, «These women live near the cities in various hospices. They accept nothing, but live from the work of their hands,» living «according to the form of the primitive church of which it is written: “The multitude of believers was of one heart and one soul”»⁷. He notes here the two central characteristics of the lifestyle of these women, their poverty and their commitment to manual labor, which characterize the commitment of Clare and the Poor Sisters as well. It was Jacques’ Parisian theological background made him sensitive to what he witnessed in the lives of the sisters minor that he met near Perugia.

² OMAECHEVARRIA, 40.

³ See, for example, HERBERT GRUNDMANN, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, trans. Steven Rowan, Notre Dame, 1995, 7-30, 55-67.

⁴ MARIA PIA ALBERZONI, *Elisabetta di Turingia, Chiara d’Assisi, Agnese di Boemia e la diffusione dell’ordine dei Frati Minori in Germania*, in *Frate Francesco*, 73 (2007), 388-389. For the development of the theology of poverty see especially pp. 385-394 and the bibliography in the notes; also consult, IDEM, *Elizabeth of Hungary “Mother of the Friars Minor”?*, in *Greyfriars Review* 20:3 (2006), 213-36.

⁵ P BUC, *Vox clamantis in deserto? Pierre le Chantre et la prédication laïque*, in *Revue Mabillon*, 65 (1993), 5-47.

⁶ MARIA PIA ALBERZONI, *Elisabetta di Turingia, Chiara d’Assisi, Agnese di Boemia e la diffusione dell’ordine dei Frati Minori in Germania*, 389-394.

⁷ JACQUES DE VITRY, *The Lady*, 428. See the analysis of CATHERINE MOONEY, *The Lesser Sisters in Jacques de Vitry’s 1216 Letter in Franciscan Studies*, 69 (2011), 1-29. OMAECHEVARRIA, 35-36: “*Ipsi autem secundum formam primitivae Ecclesiae vivunt, de quibus scriptum est: “Multitudinis credentium erat cor unum et anima una” (Act 4,32). [...] Mulieres vero iuxta civitates in diversis hospitibus simul commorantur, nihil accipiunt, sed de labore manuum vivunt*”

It is in this context and against this background that the descriptions of Clare's penitential practices in her family home before meeting Francis must be understood. The thirteenth witness in the *Process of Canonization*, Sister Cristiana, whose family was close to Clare's family in Assisi, stated that «[I]n selling her inheritance, Lady Clare's relatives wanted her to give them a better price. She did not want to sell it to them, but sold it to others so the poor would not be defrauded. All she received from the sale of the inheritance, she distributed to the poor»⁸. Other witnesses describe Clare's love for the poor including how she sent food from her own table to them. Cristiana provides other important information about Clare's life before she joined the brothers at the Portiuncola, including the story about Clare's escape from home through the barricaded exit, as well as her devotional practice as a young girl, but she mentions nothing about the influence of Francis in her testimony. Thus it would seem that Clare's love of poverty preceded the influence of Francis' preaching. No doubt she was influenced by her mother Ortolana whose pilgrimages were experienced as penitential practices that involved the harshness of the roads and the poverty intrinsic to travel at the time⁹. Thus, Clare's quest for and her initial experience of absolute poverty emerged out of a broader context of women's religious experience which was understood by men such as Hugo and Jacques as a commitment necessary for the reform of the church.

Clare's Inspiration

Although not the source for Clare's love for poverty, the preaching of Francis and the living example the brothers did provide Clare with an avenue of expression for her religious experience of poverty and penance. Lady Bona who accompanied Clare to her meetings with Francis, testified that Francis «always preached to her about converting to Jesus Christ»¹⁰. No doubt this was something that Clare had heard of before Francis, because the image of the Poor Christ was pervasive in the twelfth century, and no doubt, the connection between poverty and Jesus Christ was familiar to her¹¹. But Francis' life and preaching captured Clare's imagination with the new possibility of being able to embody her penitential experience in a concrete form of life that respected her own experience and convictions. It was unlike any other possibility Clare knew, such as the Benedictine

⁸ *Process of Canonization*, Witness 13, *Clare: Early Documents*, 187. Lady Bona, the seventeenth witness in the Process of Canonization, also stated that “[Clare] used to send to the poor the food she was supposed to have eaten and she, the witness, testified that many times she had brought it to them”, *Clare: Early Documents*, 192. Clare's sister Beatrice, the fourteenth witness in the Process of Canonization, testified that Francis preaching converted Clare, and “After that she sold her entire inheritance and part of that of the witness and gave it to the poor”. *Clare: Early Documents*, 183.

⁹ Sister Pacifica de Guelfuccio of Assisi, witness 1, *Clare: Early Documents*, 143.

¹⁰ Lady Bona of Guelfuccio of Assisi stayed in the house of Clare and knew her well. Consult, *Santa Chiara d'Assisi sotto processso*. Lettura storico-spirituale degli Atti di Canonizzazione, ed. GIOVANNI BOCCALI, Assisi 2003, 77-78.

¹¹ Here it is important to note that Clare will insist on Francis' prophecy of the Poor Sisters before he himself had brothers in her *Testament* 9-11: «Nam et ipse sanctus, adhuc non habens fratres nec socios, statim quasi post conversionem suam, cum ecclesiam Sancti Damiani aedificaret, ubi, consolatione divina totaliter visitatus, compulsus est saeculum ex toto relinquere, prae magna laetitia et illustratione Spiritus Sancti, de nobis prophetavit, quod Dominus postea adimplevit» (OMAECHVARRIA, 345-346). The prophetic nature of the life of the Poor Sisters and their *Forma vita* will be focused on poverty, as the remainder of her *Testament* demonstrates.

monastic life such as that of San Paolo delle Abbadesse where she was first taken by Francis and the brothers, or the life of the women penitents at San Angelo in Panzo. Clare's stay at these places recapitulated the existing possibilities for institutionalizing the religious ideals of women in the early thirteenth century. It was thus that, after the brothers had prepared it, Clare moved to San Damiano. Here, as the *Legend of Saint Clare* remarks, she «showed her footprints to her followers by her own manner of walking»¹².

From that moment until her death, Clare would insist on two dimensions of her penitential experience without compromise: the living connection with the Lesser Brothers, and the commitment to poverty. Clare placed these two commitments at the center of her *Form of Life* in chapter six. There, after affirming her choice to live the life of penance following the example of Francis, she articulated the first dimension of the commitment of the Poor Sisters stating that, «together with my sisters, we willingly promised [Francis] obedience», making her a member of the fraternity of the Lesser Brothers. She then went on to describe how,

When the Blessed Father saw we had no fear of poverty, hard work, trial, shame, or contempt of the world, but instead, we held them as great delights, moved by piety, he wrote a form of life for us... (*Attendens autem beatus pater quod nullam paupertatem, laborem, tribulationem, vilitatem et contemptum saeculi timeremus, immo pro magnis deliciis haberemus, pietate motus scripsit nobis formam vivendi...*)¹³.

Clare and her sisters' practice of penance and poverty was expressed in work and hardship resulting in trials and shame (*vilitatem*) and the contempt of their family and friends, describing a much broader experience of poverty than simply the refusal of ownership. What Clare is actually describing here is the social condition that she and her sisters shared with the poor and the outcasts, the *minores* of society. Clarian poverty, as also for Francis and the brothers, embraces this larger experience of identification with the *minores* of society. It is the choice of this social condition that earned both the brothers and sisters the "contempt" of society and especially of their families.

As Clare records it, Francis responded to this commitment of the sisters to penance and poverty with the *forma vivendi* preserved by Clare in the sixth chapter of her rule, in which Francis affirmed that they were living «according to the perfection of the holy Gospel» and he promised to care for them as he did for his own brothers¹⁴. In other words, the life of extreme *paupertas* and *vilitas* which Clare and her sisters were living was affirmed by Francis to be the expression of the perfection of the gospel to which these women, and Francis and his brothers, committed their lives.

The second dimension of Clare and her sisters' commitment was expressed with the second text of Francis preserved in chapter six of the *Form of Life of Clare*, the heart of which reads:

¹² *Legend of Saint Clare*, #15; *Clare: Early Documents*, 288.

¹³ *RsC 6,2, Sinossicromatica*, 68; *Clare: Early Documents*, 117-118.

¹⁴ *RsC 6:3-4; Clare: Early Documents*, 118. *Chiara di Assisi e le sue fonti legislative: Sinossi cromatica*, *Secundum perfectionem sancti evangelii*, 1, Padova, 2003, 68 (Abbreviated: *Sinossi cromatica*): "Quia divina inspiratione fecistis vos filias et ancillas altissimi summi Regis Patris caelestis et Spiritui sancto vos desponsastis eligendo vivere secundum perfectionem sancti evangelii".

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 you my ladies, and I give you my advice that you live always in this most holy life and poverty (*Ego frater Franciscus parvulus volo sequi vitam et paupertatem altissimi Domini nostri Ihesu Christi et eius sanctissimae Matris et perseverare in ea usque in finem. Et rogo vos dominas meas et consilium do vobis, ut in ista sanctissima vita et paupertate semper vivatis*)¹⁵.

Francis exhorts Clare and her sisters «to live always in this most holy life and poverty» (*in ista sanctissima vita et paupertate semper vivatis*), as Francis himself wished «to follow the life and poverty of our most high Lord Jesus Christ and of his most holy mother»¹⁶. Francis juxtaposes the «life and poverty of our most high Lord Jesus Christ and his most holy mother», with the «most holy life and poverty» that the sisters were living, establishing a connection between «*ista sanctissima vitae et paupertate*» and the «*paupertatem altissimi Domini nostril Ihesu Christi.*» The link between poverty and Jesus Christ expresses the “perfection of the holy gospel” as the “most holy life and poverty,” understood as Clare described this in terms of work and hardship resulting in trials and shame (*vilitatem*) and the contempt of their family and friends (*RsC* 6,2). Assuming that the *forma vivendi* was given in 1211-1212, and that Francis’ *Ultima voluntas* was written shortly before his death, one can see a coherence between the commitment to “most holy poverty” and the life of Jesus Christ on the part of Clare and her sisters¹⁷.

Regulating Female Poverty

Cardinal Hugo was responsive to the desire of women who sought to live poorly as demonstrated by Honorius III’s letter *Litterae tuae nobis* of 1218. Following upon that letter, Hugo introduced his rule, *Cum omnis vera religio* of 1218, for the monasteries that he was establishing, summarizing the intention and desire of these women this way: «[B]ecause you have chosen the inspiration of divine grace to travel the hard and narrow path that leads to life, and to lead a poor life in order to gain eternal riches, we have decided that the form and the observance of this way of life should be briefly set down...»¹⁸. This, however, is the only mention of poverty to appear in Hugo’s

¹⁵ *RsC* 6,7-8; *Clare: Early Documents*, 118; *Sinossi cromatica*, 70.

¹⁶ *RsC* 6I:7-9; *Clare: Early Documents*, 118; *Sinossi cromatica*, 70. Here it is important to note that in the texts in this sixth chapter of Clare’s Rule, poverty is described as “most holy” (*sanctissima paupertas*) in verses 6 & 10, an adjective that Francis uses in the *Regula bullata* 5,4: “*sicut decet servos Dei et paupertatis sanctissimae sectatores*”.

¹⁷ In curial/papal texts the adjective “most high” which here describes the life of Jesus Christ (*altissimi Domini nostril Ihesu Christi*), will be used to describe the life of poverty itself. Textually this happens first in the *Regula bullata*, 6:4 – “*Haec est illa celsitudo altissime paupertatis, que vos, carissimos fratres meos, heredes et reges regni celorum instituit, pauperes rebus fecit, virtutibus sublimavit*”, *Francesco d’Assisi: Scritti*, ed. CARLO PAOLAZZI, Grottaferrata, 2009, 328. Curial texts describe *altissime paupertatis*, and understand it differently than Francis and Clare. See below for comments on this text.

¹⁸ *The Form and Manner of Life of Cardinal Hugolino*, 2; *Lady Clare*, 75. “*Quapropter, dilecte in Domino filie, quia divina vobis gratia inspirante, per arduam viam et artam, que ad vitam ducit incedere, et vitam pauperem ducere pro eternis lucrandis divinis elegistis, religionis ipsius observantiam ad que formam vobis duximus breviter describendam [...]*”, GIOVANNI BOCCALI, *La*

rule which describes the monastic life in terms of severe practices of asceticism and mortification, to be lived in an enclosed monastery, supported by the rents of lands and properties owned by the monastery. Also, for Hugo, poverty was understood to be the condition for earning eternal riches, reducing poverty to a functional value connected to a virtuous life. This is a significantly different understanding of the role of poverty than that held by Clare and Francis.

One can notice in Hugo's description of the "hard and narrow path" an echo of what Francis saw in the life of Clare and her sisters preserved in chapter six of Clare's *Forma vita*, where the sisters' life was described as entailing "hard work"¹⁹. As noted above, Hugo wrote, « *Quapropter, dilecte in Domino filie, quia divina vobis gratia inspirante, per arduam viam et artam, que ad vitam ducit incedere, et vitam pauperem ducere pro eternis lucrandis divinis elegistis [...]* »²⁰. In fact though, Hugo will minimize poverty in the life of the nuns while accentuating the difficult ascetical requirements of life for the sisters, while the *Form of Life* given to San Damiano by Francis together with his *Last Will* for the sisters underlines evangelical perfection as poverty. In the light of these different understandings of the nature of monastic life for women, one can read chapter six of Clare's *Forma vitae* as a response to Hugo's rule, which Clare initially resisted, and as a clear statement of the central commitments of the life of the Poor Sisters at San Damiano²¹.

Francis and Hugo's *Forma vivendi*

Cardinal Hugo had a hand in the revision and redaction of the *Regula bullata*²², and it is interesting to note that the dynamic which Hugo traces in *Cum omnis vera religio* – choosing the inspiration of grace to follow the path of a poor hard life that leads to eternal life – finds an echo in the *Regula bullata*'s description of "most high poverty" that leads to eternal life:

Let the brothers not make anything their own, neither house, nor place, nor anything at all. As pilgrims and strangers in this world, serving the Lord in poverty and humility, let them go seeking alms with confidence, and they should not be ashamed because, for our sakes, our Lord make himself poor in this world (2Cor 8:9). This is the height of *most high poverty* (cfr. 2 Cor 8:2) which has made you, my most beloved brothers, heirs and kings of the kingdom of Heaven (James 2:5), poor in temporal things but exalted in virtue. Let this be your portion which leads into the land of the living. (*Fratres nichil sibi appropriant, nec domum nec locum nec aliquam rem. Et tanquam peregrini et advene in hoc seculo, in paupertate et humilitate Domino famulantes, vadant pro helemosina confidenter, nec oportet eos verecundari, quia Dominus pro nobis se fecit pauperem in hoc mundo* (2Cor 8,9). *Hec est*

Cum omnis vera religio del cardinal Ugolino. *Forma vite primitive per san Damiano et altri monastery (Bruxelles, Bibliothèque Royale, Ms. IV. 63)*" in *Frate Francesco*, 74 (2008), 456.

¹⁹ *RsC* 6,1, *Sinossi cromatica*, 68. Hugo, *Cum omnis vera religio*, 1, in, GIOVANNI BOCCALI, *La Cum omnis vera religio del cardinal Ugolino*, 456. I am grateful to MARIA PIA ALBERZONI who pointed out this connection between the two texts a number of years ago.

²⁰ *Cum omnis vera religio* 1, BOCCALI, 456.

²¹ For the relationship between Clare and Hugo/Gregory IX, see the recent presentation by MARIA PIA ALBERZONI, *Introduction: De Saint-Damien à l'ordre de sainte Claire*, in *Claire d'Assise: Écrits, Vies, Documents*, direction et traduction de JACQUES DALARUN & ARMELLE LE HUËROU, Paris, 2013, 705-816.

²² Consult PAOLAZZI, *Scritti*, 320.

illa celsitudo altissime paupertatis, que vos, carissimos fratres meos, heredes et reges regni celorum instituit, pauperes rebus fecit, virtutibus sublimavit. Hec sit portio vestra, que perducit in terram viventium)²³.

The biblical phrase “Most High Poverty”²⁴ can be found in 2 Corinthians 8,2, where Paul encourages the Corinthians to be generous in the collection taken up for the church of Jerusalem: «[F]or during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their most high poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on [the churches of Macedonia’s] part»²⁵. Here in the *Regula bullata*, the phrase *altissima paupertas* describes Jesus’ choice of poverty, and follows Paul’s description of Jesus Christ, who «though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich» (2Cor 8,9)²⁶. This text from 2 Corinthians appears in no other existing Rule up to this time²⁷. Poverty is most high because it is a choice made by Jesus and his mother, but the meaning of poverty that emerges here in chapter six of the *Regula bullata* defines poverty in terms of begging, and is “most high” because it is a virtuous activity that prepares for an eternal reward. This definition of poverty, however, lacks a reference to its penitential and social meaning in terms of identification with the *villani* and *minores* of society and manual labor which are essential to both Francis and Clare.

Even though Francis clearly makes the Rule his own here as he addresses his “most beloved brothers,” one must note that despite the clear definition of poverty as a lack of ownership combined with begging, the poverty described in chapter six is linked to the practice of virtue; as the text reads, the brothers have become «poor in temporal things but rich in virtue. Let this be your portion which leads into the land of the living» (*Pauperes rebus fecit, virtutibus sublimavit. Hec sit portio vestra, que perducit in terram viventium*)²⁸. This reflects Hugo’s understanding of the nature of religious life as articulated in his *Cum omnis vera religio*: the emphasis is placed on asceticism and the practice of virtue as the foundation for the life²⁹.

²³ *RegB* 6,1-5; *Francis of Assisi: the Saint*, 103. PAOLAZZI, *Scritti*, 229-330.

²⁴ Except in this one case, the writings of Francis always reserve the adjective *altissima* (most high) for God. See I.R. HERRERA&A.O. CARMONA, *Los escritos de san Francisco de Asís*², Murcia, 2003, 576.

²⁵ The *Vulgate* reads: «*Quod in multo experimento tribulationis abundantia gaudii ipsorum et altissima paupertas eorum abundavit in divitias simplicitatis eorum*».

²⁶ The *Vulgate* reads: «*Scitis enim gratiam Domini nostri, Iesu Christi, quoniam propter vos egenus factus est, cum esset dives, ut illius inopia vos divites essetis*». This text from 2 Corinthians appears also in *EpFid II* 5: «*Qui, cum dives esset (2Cor 8,9) super omnia, voluit ipse in mundo cum beatissima Virgine matre sua eligere paupertatem*».

²⁷ FERNANDO URIBE, *La Regla de san Francisco: Letra y espíritu*, Murcia, 2006, p. 198: «Enestecaso la ejemplaridad de Cristo espresentada a través la frase: *porque el Señor se hizo pobre por nosotros en este mundo*, casi un a trascripción de la usadapor San Pablo en 2Cor 8,9.... Es, por lo demás, unacitamuy original, pues no apareceenninguna de las antguasreglas.»

²⁸ *RegB* 6,4-5. *Francis: Early Documents*, p. 103; PAOLAZZI, *Scritti*, 229-330.

²⁹ BOCCALI, *Cum omnis vera religio*, p. 456: «*Cum omnis vera religio et vite institutio approbata certis constet regulis et mensuris, certis etiam constet legibus discipline; quisquis religiosam ducere vitam cupit, nisi certam conversationis sue regulam disciplinamque vivendi observare studuerit diligenter; eo ipso a rectitudine deviat quo rectitudinis lineas non observet; et ibi deficiendi incurrit*

This connection of poverty with virtue also reflects the changing life and ministry of the Lesser Brothers, where in contrast to the *Regula non bullata*, the brothers no longer support themselves primarily through manual labor supplemented by begging only when necessary. Now, the main support of the brothers has become begging (*Et tanquam peregrini et advene in hoc seculo, in paupertate et humilitate Domino famulantes, vadant pro helemosina confidenter... [RegB 6,2]*), while manual labor is done only by those who have that grace (*Fratres illi quibus gratiam dedit Dominus laborandi, laborent fideliter et devote, ita quod, excluso otio anime inimico, sancte orationis et devotionis spiritum non exstinguant [RegB 5,1]*)³⁰. This reflects a significant shift in the lifestyle of the brothers as clerical ministry and formal preaching grew in importance, a shift certainly supported by Hugo. Seven years later, Hugo, now Gregory IX, will make a legal determination distinguishing between ownership and use in *Quo elongati*³¹, that will provide the foundation and justification of what for many friars, and Clare in particular, would consider a significant mitigation of Francis' experience of what it meant to live poverty. The biblical foundation for this change was already inherent in chapter six of the Rule, which identified "Most High Poverty" with begging and virtue, defining the life that Jesus himself chose (*2Cor 8,9*). As the brothers would settle more into urban pastoral ministry, the life of poverty became more focused on the practice of virtue experienced primarily through an ascetical regime, an understanding that was at the core of Hugo's approach to religious life³². "Most High Poverty" expresses Cardinal Hugo's understanding of the practice of poverty which differs from that of Francis and Clare, and it is likely that Hugo and the Roman Curia is the source for this expression in the chapter six of the *Regula bullata*³³. In contrast, Francis and Clare describe poverty as "holy" or "blessed".

periculum, ubi per discretionis virtutem certum ac stabile perficiendi collocare neglexerit fundamentum».

³⁰ PAOLAZZI, *Scritti*, 328.

³¹ *Quo elongati*, 6. Francis: *Early Documents*, 573: «Therefore, we decree that property may be possessed neither individually nor in common. However, the brotherhood may have the use of equipment or books and such other moveable property as is permitted, and the individual brother may use these things at the discretion of the general and provincial ministers. Dominion over places or houses in excerpted: this is the right of those who whom you know they belong». HERBERT GRUNDMANN, *Die Bulle Quo elongati Papst Gregors IX*, in *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum*, 54 (1961), 22: «Dicimus itaque, quod nec in communi nec in speciali debent proprietatem habere, sed utensilium et librorum et eorum mobiliu, que licet habere, ordo usum habeat et fratres, secundum quod generalis minister vel provinciales disponendum duxerint, his utantur, salvo locorum et domorum dominio illis, ad quos noscitur pertinere».

³² One can note this change in the experience of poverty as one moves from Celano's *Vita beati Francisci*, to Julian of Speyer's *Vita sancti Francisci*, written for the friars of the University convent in Paris, and most clearly in Bonaventure's *Legenda maior*, chapters 5-12!

³³ MARIA PIA ALBERZONI, *Santa povertà e beata semplicità: Francesco d'Assisi e las Chiesa Romana*, Milano, 2015, 13, comments that Francis usually describes poverty as "holy" or "blessed": "Così pure *paupertas*, nelle sue diverse accezioni, rinvia inequivocabilmente all'universo francescano, anche se alla *sancta* (o *beata*) *paupertas*, come Francesco solitamente la definisce, si affianca ben presto l'esaltazione dell'*altissima paupertas*, laddove però *altissima* non risulta una determinazione propria del lessico di Francesco e di Chiara, ma sembra piuttosto derivare dal

Hugo and the *Privilege of Clare*

During the 1220's, Clare was engaged in a conversation with Hugo/Gregory IX, concerning the form of life lived at San Damiano which centered around Hugo's desire and increasing insistence that San Damiano accept his rule³⁴. Clare and the sisters continued to refuse ownership, and supported themselves by the manual labor they were able to do, while dependent on the help of the brothers who lived nearby. Hugo moved forward with the establishment of his own monastic order for enclosed women through the imposition and enforcement of the observance of his *Forma vite*, which allowed monasteries to own properties and to live from benefices. Clare resisted this arrangement of Hugo's Rule, insisting that having promised obedience to Francis, they belonged to Francis' order with a different practice of poverty.

The *Process of Canonization* reflects the pressure Hugo/Gregory brought to bear on Clare and the Sisters at San Damiano. The second witness, Benvenuta of Perugia, testified that «[Clare] had a great love of poverty. Neither Pope Gregory nor the Bishop of Ostia could ever make her consent to receive any possessions»³⁵. But after the death of Francis, Clare lost an ally in her struggle, and eventually she agreed to accept Hugo's Rule but only together with a privilege of poverty which Gregory conceded in his letter of 1228, *Sicut manifestum est*, and in which he articulated his own rich biblical theology as the foundation for his understanding of poverty. Here are the central verses of his letter:

As is evident, you have renounced the desire for all temporal things, desiring to dedicate yourselves to the Lord alone. Because of this, since you have sold all things and given them to the poor (Lk 18,22), you propose not to have any possessions whatsoever, clinging in all things to the footprints of Him, the Way, the Truth, and the Life (Jn 14,6) Who, for our sake, was made himself poor (2 Cor 8,9). Nor does such a lack of possessions frighten you from a proposal of this sort; for the left hand (Song 2,6) of the heavenly Spouse is under your head (Song 8,3) to support the weakness of your body, which you have placed under the law of your soul through an ordered charity (Song 2,4) [*Sicut manifestum est, cupientes soli Domino dedicari, abdicastis rerum temporalium appetitum; propter quod, venditis omnibus et pauperibus erogatis, nullas omnino possessiones habere proponitis, illius vestigiis per omnia inhaerentes, qui pro nobis factus est pauper, via, veritas, atque vita; nec ab huiusmodi proposito vos rerum terret inopia; nam laeva Sponsi caelestis est sub capite*

vocabolario della curia papale e, segnatamente, del cardinal Ugo d'Ostia". See her comments concerning word usage in footnote ten on the same page.

³⁴ For a succinct overview of this consult, MARIA PIA ALBERZONI, *Introduction: De Saint-Damien à l'ordre de sainte Claire*, in *Claire d'Assise: Écrits, Vies, Documents*, direction et traduction de JACQUES DALARUN & ARMELLE LE HUËROU, Paris, 2013, 791-803. See also, *Chiara di Assisi: Una vita prende forma. Iter storico*, Federazione S. Chiara di Assisi delle Clarisse di Umbria-Sardegna, Padova, 2005, 51-73.

³⁵ *Process of Canonization* II:22; *Clare: Early Documents*, 155. See also, *Process of Canonization* I,13; *Clare: Early Documents*, 147 – "She saw and heard the Lord Pope Gregory of happy memory wanted to give her many things and buy possessions for the monastery. But she would never consent."

vestro ad sustentandum infirma corporis vestri, quae legi mentis ordinata caritate stravistis]³⁶.

In the first sentence of this text, Gregory juxtaposes Luke's challenge to the rich ruler to «sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven» (*Lk* 18,22), with the image of clinging to the footprints of the Johannine Jesus who is »the Way, the Truth, and the Life» (*John* 14,6), together with the Pauline image of Jesus who was made poor for our sake (*2Cor* 8,9). In so doing, he encourages Clare not to fear the difficulties that will arise by using an image from the Song of Songs suggesting how the bridegroom's hand embraces and supports his spouse (*Song* 2,6). Gregory concludes with an allusion to the spirituality of ordered charity³⁷, which for the virgin spouse of Christ, implied having one's life and values in order, i.e., living toward the eschatological fulfillment of espousal with Christ. This reference of Gregory to "ordered charity" echoes the *Song of Songs* 2,4, which reads: «He has ordered charity in me» (*Ordinavit in me caritatem*).

Using these biblical and espousal images Hugo connects the Clarian-Franciscan *sequela Christi* with the spirituality of espousal with Christ, and in doing this he subordinates the lived experience of the poverty of Clare and her sisters to the traditional image of spiritual marriage which emphasized virginity as the way to God for women³⁸. In Gregory's understanding, poverty becomes an ascetic means as preparation for future espousal. In other words, poverty prepares one to espouse Christ in an espousal that is deferred into the future; poverty thus becomes merely a preparation for espousal, and not the reality of espousal itself.

The second part of Gregory's letter develops his eschatological understanding of poverty:

³⁶ *The Privilege of Poverty of Pope Gregory IX, Clare: Early Documents*, 87. OMAECHEVARRIA, 236-237.

³⁷ For the twelfth century theology of "ordered charity" consult, GUIDO CARIBONI, *Ordo noster est caritas*. Osservazioni su ideali guida, testi normative e dinamiche istituzionali presso le prime generazioni cistercensi, in Idem, *Il nostro ordine è la Carità. Cistercensi nei secoli XII e XIII*, Milano, 2011, 59-92. For the twelfth-century theology of "ordered charity" consult, BERNARD MCGINN, "Introduction: The Ordering of Charity", in Idem, *The Growth of Mysticism: Gregory the Great through the 12th Century*, The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism, vol. 2, New York, 1994, 149-157. McGinn comments that in the twelfth century, "The term *ordo* was among the most semantically complex in the medieval vocabulary. Along with the notions of order as a measure or a rule, a political system, a legal framework, a recognizable group or class (e.g., *ordo monasticus*), a discipline, a ceremony, an ecclesiastical office and its duties, etc., *ordo* could be taken in the sense of *ordination*, that is, the state that exists when things have been put in their proper relationship" (153).

³⁸ For background on the role of virginity and enclosure in Hugo's perspective, see, PIETRO MARANESI, *La clausura di Chicarad'Assisi*, Assisi, 2012, 21-51. Maranesi, 51-52, comments that while Clare's use of the spousal metaphor reflects her historical context, nonetheless, Clare "[O]pera una diversa accentuazione della metafora sponsale, mettendo in risalto non la clausura quale spazio e segno dell'amore della sposa per lo sposo, ma un tema nuovo legato alla novità da lei scoperta proprio nell'adesione all'ideale di Francesco, cioè la povertà".

Finally, He who feeds the birds of the heavens and clothes the lilies of the field will not fail you in either food or clothing, until He ministers to you in heaven, when His right hand especially will more happily embrace you in the fullness of his sight. (*Denique qui pascit aves caeli et lilia vestit agri vobis non deerit advictum pariter et vestitum, donec seipsum vobis transiens in aeternitate ministret, cum scilicet eius dextera vos felicius amplexabitur in suae plenitudine visionis*)³⁹.

In this text Hugo connects the image of God's care for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field (Mt 6,26-28), with the assurance that God will provide for Clare during her life until she arrives in heaven where «His right hand especially will more happily embrace you in the fullness of His sight» (Song 8,3). Again, Gregory subordinates the lived poverty of Clare and her sisters to the spiritual (other-worldly) experience of virginal espousal with Christ, underlining the eschatological dimension of poverty that directs attention to the future of heavenly intimacy with the spouse, drawing on Cistercian monastic theology⁴⁰ which Gregory esteemed highly. He goes on to conclude that «Therefore, we confirm with our apostolic authority, as you requested, your proposal of “most high poverty”, granting you by the authority of [those] present that no one can compel you to receive possessions» (*altissimaepaupertatis: Sicutigitursupplicastis, altissimaepaupertatispropositumvestrumfavore apostolic roboramus, auctoritatevobispraesentiumindulgentesutreciperepossiones a nullocompellipossitis*)⁴¹. Gregory's use of “most high poverty” demonstrates again that he operates out of a different understanding standing than Clare's “most holy poverty”. Gregory's understanding of poverty is reductive, and is expressed as the refusal of possessions, without any reference to the social context of lived poverty and penance for Clare.

What Gregory attempted to do in *Sicut manifestum est*, was to redefine Franciscan-Clarian poverty by subordinating lived poverty to a spousal relationship with the Bridegroom, for which the traditional monastic life – here specifically Gregory's rule, *Cum omnis vera religio*– provides the foundation. But as indicated by a single and brief reference to poverty in his Rule, poverty is merely one of the many practices calling forth the ascetical effort of the women that is necessary to prepare for the embrace of the bridegroom. While Gregory accepts Clare and her sisters' commitment to poverty, he reinterprets its meaning and usefulness with the spirituality of virginal espousal. Alexander IV's *Bull of Canonization, Clara Claris praeclara*, will follow a similar path by holding

³⁹ *The Privilege of Poverty of Pope Gregory IX, Clare: Early Documents*, 87. OMAECHEVARRIA, 236-237.

⁴⁰ See MARSHA DUTTON, *The Cistercian Source*, in *Goad and Nail*, ed. ROZANNE ELDER, *Studies in Medieval Cistercian History*, 10, Kalamazoo, 1985, 151-178. In comparing Cistercian and Franciscan mysticism Dutton makes this important distinction: «Bonaventure insists on coming to God by imitation of Jesus rather than by intimacy with him. ... Aelred guides the contemplative toward spiritual union with Christ through love of him, not toward perfection through imitation of him, suggesting that such perfection, such imitation, is neither possible or necessary» (pp. 166-167). See also her insightful essay, *Intimacy and Imitation: The Humanity of Christ in Cistercian Spirituality*, in *Erudition at God's Service*, *Studies in Medieval Cistercian History*, 11, JOHN R. SOMMERFELDT, ed., Kalamazoo, 1987, 33-69.

⁴¹ *The Privilege of Poverty of Pope Gregory IX, Clare: Early Documents*, 87. OMAECHEVARRIA, 237.

up virginal espousal as the key to Clare's holiness, as does the dedicatory preface to *The Legend of Saint Clare*⁴². The papal/curial understanding of poverty becomes clear in these texts.

Clare's Poverty after the death of Francis

Having accepted Gregory's *Privilege of Poverty* Clare will continue to hold fast to her commitment to poverty while relying on the connection between the Sisters at San Damiano with the Lesser Brothers. However, her connection with the brothers was threatened by the publication of Gregory IX's *Quo elongati* in September 1230, which responded to a number of questions the brothers asked regarding the interpretation of the *Regula bullata*. In this case, the question regarded chapter eleven's prescription, «I strictly command all the brothers not to have any suspicious dealings with women, and they may not enter the monastery of nuns, excepting those brothers to whom speak permission has been granted by the Apostolic See» (*Precipio firmiter fratribus universis, ne habeant suspecta consortia vel consilia mulierum, et ne ingrediantur monasteria monacharum, preter illos quibus a Sede Apostolica concessa est licentia specialis*)⁴³. This prescription from entering the monasteries of nuns, which has no parallel in the *Regula non bullata*, first appeared in Hugo's *Cum omnis vera religio* 10, which states that:

Concerning the entrance of persons into the monastery, we firmly and strictly decree that an Abbess or her sisters may never permit any religious person or secular of whatever dignity to enter the monastery. This is allowed to no one except to whom or concerning whom the permission has been granted by the Supreme Pontiff or by us, or following us by him to whom, as to us, the Lord Pope has entrusted the concern and special care over you⁴⁴ (*De ingressu personarum in monasterium firmiter ac districte precipimus, ut ulla numquam abbatissa, vel eius sorores aliquam personam religiosam seu seculare[m] ac cuiuslibet dignitatis in monasterium intrare permittant. Nec omnino hoc alicui liceat, nisi cui et de quibus concessum a summo pontifice fuerit, vel a nobis seu post nos ab illo cui sicut et nobis sollicitudinem atque curam specialem gerendam de vobis specialiter dominus papa duxerit iniugendam*)⁴⁵.

Access to the monasteries of the nuns of Gregory's Order was to be controlled by him alone. This prescription of *Cum omnis vera religio* seems to be the basis for the prescription of chapter 11 of the *Regula bullata*, which effectively repeats the prohibition for the Lesser Brothers regarding *monasteria monacharum*. The brothers' practice was that those friars responsible for the care of San Damiano would enter the monastery to preach, and, since this was the practice that derived from the time of St. Francis, they interpreted *Regula bullata* chapter eleven to refer only to the Papal Monasteries. In *Quo elongati*, Gregory IX, responded that the brothers' understanding of the prescription was incorrect, and that «[T]he prohibition affects the communities of nuns of every description. ...No one has any access to them without the express permission of the Apostolic

⁴² Consult *Clare: Early Documents*, 263-265, 277-279.

⁴³ *Francis: Early Documents I*, 106; *Scritti*, 336.

⁴⁴ *Clare: Early Documents* 81.

⁴⁵ HUGO, *Cum omnis vera religio*, 12; BOCCALI, 468.

See»⁴⁶. The *Legend of Clare* recounts Clare's reaction to Gregory's directive: «At once she sent back to the minister all the brothers, not wanting to have the brother-questers who acquired corporal bread when they could not have the brother-preachers for spiritual bread. When Pope Gregory heard this, he immediately mitigated that prohibition in to the hands of the general minister»⁴⁷. Severing the connection between the Lesser Brothers and the Poor Sisters at San Damiano would help Gregory's program of enforcing acceptance of his rule and understanding of poverty.

Clare's Conversation with Agnes of Prague

As Clare's reputation and life at San Damiano spread, it led other monasteries to request permission to follow the observances of San Damiano⁴⁸. Clare's correspondence with Agnes of Prague provided the occasion for Clare and her sisters to articulate their theological and spiritual understanding of their form of life⁴⁹. Writing to Agnes, Clare employed the traditional theology of virginal espousal, such as Hugo introduced in his *Privilege of Poverty*, to frame her theology of the life lived at San Damiano. In doing this though, Clare's experience and understanding of poverty became the lens for her own reinterpretation of the tradition of virginal espousal. The following examples will demonstrate both Clare's theological method and her theological acumen in defense of poverty.

In the *First Letter to Agnes*, Clare celebrated Agnes' entrance into the monastery she had founded in Prague. The central metaphor that Clare develops is Agnes' espousal to Christ which, Clare affirms, Agnes chose over espousal to other powerful men who sought her hand in marriage. Agnes' choice of Jesus Christ as spouse, Clare wrote, has «adorned her with the banners of an

⁴⁶ *Quo elongati*, 11, Francis: *Early Documents*; GRUNDMANN, 24: «Nos utique generaliter id esse prohibitum de quarum libet cenobiis monialium respondemus...».

⁴⁷ *The Legend of Saint Clare*, 37; *Clare: Early Documents*, 312; OMAECHEVARRIA, 172: «Cum semel dominus Papa Gregorius prohibuisset, ne aliquis frater ad monasteria dominarum sine sua licentia pergeret, dolens pia mater cibum sacrae doctrinae rarius habituras sorores, cum gemitu dixit: "Omnes nobis auferat de cetero fratres, postquam vitalis nutrimenti nobis abstulit praebitores". Et statim omnes fratres ad Ministerium remisit, nolens habere eleemosynarios qui panem corporalem acquirent, postquam panis spiritualis eleemosynarios non haberent. Quod cum audiret Papa Gregorius, statim prohibitum illud in generalis Ministri manibus relaxavit». See the comments of MARCO BARTOLI, *Gregorio IX, Chiara d'Assisi e le prime dispute all'interno del movimento francescano*, in *Rendiconti*, 35 (1980) 97-108.

⁴⁸ For the historical background to the relationship between Pope Gregory IX, Clare of Assisi and Agnes of Prague during this period consult, MARIA PIA ALBERZONI, *Chiara e san Damiano tra Ordine minoritico e curia papale*, in *Convivium Assisiense*, n.s., 6 (2004) 27-70.

⁴⁹ For background to Agnes of Prague and Clare's letters, consult, *Chiara d'Assisi: Lettere ad Agnese, La Visione dello specchio*, eds GIOVANNI POZZI & BEATRICE RIMA, Piccola Biblioteca 426, Milan, 1999, 97-145. CHIARA AMATA TOGNALI, *Quella prudente follia d'amore*, Presenza di san Francesco 45, Milan, 2004), 17-77. JOAN MUELLER, *The Privilege of Poverty: Clare of Assisi, Agnes of Prague, and the Struggle for a Franciscan Rule for Women*, University Park, PA, 2006. ALFONSO MARINI, "Ancilla Christi, plantula sancti Francisci: Gli Scritti di santa Chiara e la Regola", in *Chiara di Assisi. Atti del XX Convegno internazionale Assisi*, 15-17 ottobre 1992. Società internazionale di studi francescani, Spoleto, 1993, 127-145.

undefiled virginity and a most holy poverty», and this relationship with her spouse strengthens her «in the holy service of the Poor Crucified» who «endured the suffering of the cross» which reconciles to God,

Therefore, most beloved sister, or should I say, Lady worthy of great respect, because You are the *spouse and the mother and the sister* (2Cor 11,2) of my Lord Jesus Christ and are beautifully adorned with the banners of an undefiled virginity and a most holy poverty, be strengthened in the holy service of the Poor Crucified undertaken with a passionate desire, Who *endured* (Heb 12,2) the suffering of the cross for us all, delivering us *from the power* of the prince of *darkness* (Col 1,13) (*Ergo, soror carissima, immo domina veneranda nimium, quia sponsa et mater estis et soror Domini mei Iesu Christi, virginitatis inviolabilis et paupertatis sanctissimae vexillo resplendentissime insignita, in sancto servitio confortamini, pauperis Crucifixi ardenti desiderio inchoato, qui pro nobis omnibus crucis sustinuit passionem, eruens nos de potestate principis tenebrarum, qua ob transgressionem primi parentis victi vinculis tenebamur, et nos reconcilians Deo Patri*)⁵⁰.

The first letter goes on to underline and develop this identification of the Spouse with the poor crucified Christ whose poverty «bestows eternal riches on those who love and embrace her,» and «promises the kingdom of heaven» to those who love her. This is the spouse that Christ “came down to embrace before all else» (vv. 15-17). Here then we have Clare describing to Agnes how her spouse Jesus Christ, came down to earth to espouse “Lady Poverty” as his bride⁵¹. For Clare it is by embracing poverty, Christ’s bride, that one espouses Christ. And further, it is the service of the poor crucified one who “endured the suffering of the cross” which reconciled us to God. Clare experiences the mystery of redemption as a mystery of exchange: Christ came down to us, embraced poverty, and sustained the passion for us, raising us up to the kingdom. The medium of this divine exchange is poverty which Clare celebrates:

O blessed poverty, who bestows eternal riches on those who love her and embrace her! O holy poverty, God promises the kingdom of heaven and, beyond any doubt, reveals eternal glory and blessed life to those who have and desire her! O pious poverty, whom the Lord Jesus Christ who ruled and still rules heaven and earth, Who spoke and things were made, come down to embrace before all else! (*O beata paupertas, quae diligentibus et amplexantibus eam divitias praestat aeternas! O sancta paupertas, quam habentibus et desiderantibus a Deo caelorum regnum promittitur et aeterna gloria vitaeque beata procul dubio exhibetur! O pia paupertas, quam Dominus Iesus Christus, qui caelum terramque regebat et regit, qui dixit etiam et sunt facta, dignatus est prae ceteris amplexari!*)⁵².

⁵⁰ 2EpAg, 12-14; *Clare: Early Documents*, 44-45; OMAECHEVARRIA, 383.

⁵¹ See the comments of MICHAEL CUSATO, *Commercium: From the Profane to the Sacred*, in *Francis of Assisi: History, Hagiography and Hermeneutics in the Early Documents*, ed. JAY M. HAMMOND, New York, 2004, 188-194.

⁵² 1EpAg, 15-17; *Clare: Early Documents*, 45; OMAECHEVARRIA, 383. The translation of *pia paupertas* is difficult to render in English. Armstrong chose to translate it as “O God-centered poverty”. Others have translated it as “O Faithful Poverty”. I prefer the English cognate which denotes a richer context. *Pietas* connotes relationship that is experienced as sacred and lived with compassion and care. CLAUDIA MARKERT analyzes poverty in the *Letters to Agnes* against the

“Holy poverty” for Clare is thus the vocation of Clare and Agnes! Holy poverty is Christ’s bride first and foremost. By living “holy poverty” Clare espouses the poor crucified Christ.

The verses that follow present Clare’s biblical reflections on poverty paralleling Cardinal Hugo in *Sicut manifestum est*, but with a significantly different dynamic. First, Clare juxtaposes two gospel images from Matthew and John respectively (just as Hugo did in the *Sicut manifestum est*): «He says: For the foxes have dens, *and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man, Christ, has nowhere to lay His head (Mt 8,20), but bowing His head he gave up his spirit” (Jn 19,30)*» [*Vulpes enim foveas, inquit, habent et volucres caeli nidos, filius autem hominis, id est Christus, non habet ubi caput reclinet, sed inclinato capite tradidit spiritum*]⁵³. Clare connects the poverty of the itinerant Christ – having nowhere to lay his head – with the cross of Christ – bowing his head dying. This is followed by Clare’s conclusion:

If so great a good Lord, then, on coming into the Virgin’s womb, wanted to appear despised, needy (2 Cor .:9), and poor in this world, so that people who were very poor and needy, suffering excessive hunger of heavenly nourishment, may become rich in Him by possessing the Kingdom of heaven, be very joyful and glad, filled with a remarkable happiness and a spiritual joy! Because since contempt of the world has pleased you more than its honors, poverty more than earthly riches, you have sought to store up greater treasures not on earth but in heaven....” (*Si ergo tantus et talis Dominus in uterum veniens virginalem, despectus, egenus et pauper in mundo voluit apparere, ut homines, qui erant pauperrimi et egeni, caelesti pabuli sufferentes nimiam egestatem, efficerentur in illo divites regna caelestia possidendo, exsultate plurimum et gaudete, repletae ingenti gaudio et laetitia spirituali, quia, cum vobis magis placuisset contemptus saeculi quam honores, paupertas quam divitiae temporales et magis thesauros in caelo recondere quam in terra [...]*)⁵⁴.

For Clare, it is poverty, the experience of Jesus Christ himself who became “despised, and needy (poor) in this world,” echoing the text of 2 Corinthians 8,9, which gives access to the kingdom of God and heavenly reward. The dynamic here parallels that of Hugo in *Sicut manifestum est*, but the experience Clare describes is that of actual lived poverty as the following of Christ, and not that of a spiritual marriage with Christ with strong eschatological overtones. This suggests that while Clare accepted Gregory’s *Privilege of Poverty* as a legal justification for the practice of poverty at San Damiano, she did not accept his theological understanding of poverty which valued poverty only for its ascetical meaning and as the means for a struggle that prepares one for spiritual espousal. While Gregory subsumed poverty into the theology of spiritual espousal, Clare subsumes spiritual espousal

background of the life of the early brotherhood and Francis’ writings on poverty: “O beata paupertas. *Zur Auslegung der Armut in den Briefen der hl.Klara an Agnes von Prag*”, in G. MELVILLE, A. KEHNER, eds., *In proposito paupertatis: Studien zum Armutsverständnis bei den mittelalterlichen Bettelorden*. Vita Regularis, 13, Munster, 2001, 51-68. Her comments on the First letter to Agnes are found at 58-61.

⁵³ *1EpAg*, 18; *Clare: Early Documents*, 45; OMAECHEVARRIA, 383. In *Sicut manifestum est*, Gregory paraphrases *Mt* 6,26-28, *Lk* 12,37, and *Song* 2,6 & 8,3.

⁵⁴ *1EpAg*, 19-22; *Clare: Early Documents*, 45; OMAECHEVARRIA, 383-384.

into the experience and theology of real lived poverty at San Damiano: espousal with the poor Christ is the life of poverty itself.

Clare continues her theological reflection on *sanctissima paupertas* in the Second Letter to Agnes, where she praises Agnes as someone, «zealous for the holiest poverty, in a spirit of great humility and the most ardent love, [who has] held fast to *the footprints* of Him to Whom [she] merited to be joined in marriage»⁵⁵. For Clare, holding fast to the footprints of Christ means holding fast to poverty. Clare then urges Agnes to hold on to the “*one thing necessary*”: «But because *one thing is necessary* (Lk 10,42), I bear witness to that one thing and encourage you, for love of Him to Whom you have offered yourself as a *holy* and pleasing *sacrifice* (Rom 12,1), that you always be mindful of your commitment like another Rachel always seeing your beginning. What you hold, may you hold, what you do, may you do and not stop (*Sed quia unum est necessarium, hoc unum obtestor et moneo per amorem illius, cui te sanctam et beneplacentem hostiam obtulisti, ut tui memor propositi velut altera Rachel tuum semper videns principium, quod tenes teneas, quod facis facias, nec dimittas*)»⁵⁶.

After admonishing Agnes not to be dissuaded from her proposal by anyone⁵⁷, Clare identifies the “one things necessary” with, “But as a poor virgin, embrace the poor Christ” (*Sed pauperem Christum virgo pauper amplectere*)⁵⁸. Notice that Clare identifies the active life of real poverty as the one thing necessary, and by implication as the “better part” that traditionally was associated with contemplation. Clare emphasizes the real concrete life of poverty as she continues to challenge Agnes to,

Look upon Him who became contemptible for you, and follow Him, making yourself contemptible in this world for Him. Your Spouse though more beautiful than the children of men, became, for your salvation, the lowest of men, was despised, struck, scourged untold times throughout His entire body, and then died amid the suffering of the Cross. Most noble Queen, gaze, consider, contemplate desiring to imitate your spouse (*Vide contemptibilem pro te factum et sequere, facta pro ipso contemptibilis in hoc mundo. Sponsum tuum prae filiis hominum speciosum, pro salute tua factum virorum vilissimum, despectum, percussum et toto corpore multipliciter flagellatum, inter ipsas crucis angustias morientem, regina praenobilis, intuere, considera, contemplare, desiderans imitari*)⁵⁹.

The language used by Clare here to describe the poor crucified Christ is similar to the language used by Francis to describe what he saw in the sisters at San Damiano as recorded by Clare in her Rule:

⁵⁵ 2EpAg, 7; Clare: *Early Documents* 47. OMAECHEVARRIA, 389: «*Aemula sanctissimae paupertatis effecta, in spiritu magnae humilitatis et ardentissimae caritatis eius adhaesisti vestigiis, cuius meruisti connubio copulari* ».

⁵⁶ 2EpAg, 10-11; Clare: *Early Documents*, 47-48; OMAECHEVARRIA, 389.

⁵⁷ In 2EpAg, 12-17, Clare tells Agnes not to listen to anyone who would try to turn her away from her commitment, but rather, to follow the counsel of brother Elias, the General Minister. The person Clare refers to here is no doubt Gregory IX, who was refusing Agnes’ request for the form of life of San Damiano.

⁵⁸ 2EpAg, 18; Clare: *Early Documents*, 49; OMAECHEVARRIA, 390.

⁵⁹ 2EpAg, 19-20; my translation; OMAECHEVARRIA, 390.

«[T]he blessed Francis saw we had no fear of poverty, hard work, trial, shame or contempt of the world»⁶⁰. The “one thing necessary” is the contemplation of the poor crucified Christ translated into a form of living in the world – the *Forma vitae* of the Poor Sisters at San Damiano is the following of the footprints of the poor crucified Christ while living in this world. And, here again the theme of virginal espousal is subordinated to the lived experience of poverty through Clare’s identification of the Spouse as the poor crucified Jesus Christ.

Agnes of Prague and the *Privilege of Poverty*

After repeated requests, Gregory responded positively to Agnes of Prague’s request to live with the same privilege of poverty that Clare and her sisters enjoyed at San Damiano with his bull *Pia credulitate tenentes*, of April 15, 1238. After affirming that Agnes’ desire for poverty comes from the Spirit of God, Gregory describes Agnes’ desire for poverty with these words:

[Y]ou have been contemplating that poverty of the Queen of Virgins, which produces lasting benefits for the faithful, because she did not have a place to go among the poor even when she gave birth to the King of heaven. As a consequence, it is evident that you are convinced that it is improper for servants and handmaids to embrace luxury when the only begotten Creator of all things was laid in a manger, wrapped in poor swaddling clothes (*[V]os reginae virginum locum in loco pauperum, etiam quando coeli regem genuit, non habentis, contemplantis penuriam, ubertatis perpetuae fidelibus productivam, indecens reputetis servas, et ancillas fovere deliciis, cum pannis vilibus involutus in praesepio, steterit unigenitus omnium conditor*)⁶¹.

Notice here how Gregory connects the meaning of poverty with Mary in the mystery of her motherhood of Jesus, not having a place in which to give birth, and laying her newborn son in a manger wrapped in swaddling clothing. Gregory is asking Agnes to imitate Mary, the mother of Jesus, but while Mary plays an important role in Clare’s spirituality, Clare will continue to insist on following or imitating the poor Son of God, a significantly different experience⁶²! Here, certainly, Gregory echoes a Franciscan *topos* connected to Francis’ devotion to the Incarnation of poverty, an image that Clare will respond with to Agnes with in her third letter⁶³. Gregory’s use of Mary as icon of poverty functions differently than it does for Clare, as can be seen when he continues by specifying the goal or purpose of poverty:

You, who have contemned things visible in order to hasten to the delights of things unseen, are desirous of avoiding that obstacle – which is accustomed to arise – to a contemplation of

⁶⁰ *RsC* 6,2.

⁶¹ *Clare, Early Documents*, 356; *Bullarium Franciscanum* I, 236-237.

⁶² On this point, consult Catherine M. Mooney, “*Imitatio Christi* or *Imitatio Mariae*? Clare of Assisi and her Interpreters in *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, ed. Catherine M. Mooney, Philadelphia, 1999, 52-77.

⁶³ For background on Clare’s *Third Letter to Agnes of Prague* consult, JOAN MUELLER, *The Privilege of Poverty*, 81-85, and Idem, *A Companion to Clare of Assisi: Life, Writings and Spirituality*, Leiden, 2010, 148-159. See also, Frances Teresa Dowling, *Saint Clare of Assisi*. Volume 2, *The Context of Her Life*, Phoenix, 2013, 164-184.

God, which is unhampered by the care of temporal things (*[V]obis, quae contemptis visibilibus, ab invisibilium delicias properantes vitare studetis obstaculum in temporalium spinis in offensam faciem Dei [...]*)⁶⁴.

Here one can see Gregory's insistence on the priority of contemplation for women monastics. In other words, poverty plays only a functional role in that it supports and focuses the attention of religious women on the invisible God above. In emphasizing this role of poverty, Gregory is directing Agnes away from the concrete lived experience of poverty in the ordinary experience of life to its fruit, which exists in a different place in another world.

In her third letter, with this text of Gregory in the background, in addition to responding to Agnes' questions regarding the practice of fasting at San Damiano, Clare continues her redefinition of the "one thing necessary" begun in her second letter traditionally identified with contemplation. Clare however, develops the imagery used by Gregory's response to Agnes with his *Pia credulitate tenentes* in order to reaffirm her and her sisters' experience of poverty as a Christological reality. First, she presents a very traditional description of contemplation that would certainly resonate with Gregory's approach:

Place your mind before the mirror of eternity! Place your soul in the splendor of divine 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, so that you too may feel what His friends feel in tasting the hidden sweetness that, from the beginning God Himself has reserved for his lovers [3LAg 12-14] (*Pone mentem tuam in speculo aeternitatis, pone animam tuam in splendore gloriae, pone cor tuum in figura divinae substantiae et transforma te ipsam totam per contemplationem in imagine[m] divinitatis ipsius, ut et ipsa sentias quod sentiunt amici gustando absconditam dulcedinem, quam ipse Deus ab initio suis amatoribus reservavit*)⁶⁵.

To this point, this text could have been written by Gregory IX himself with the images Clare employs: "mirror of eternity", "splendor of divine glory", "figure of the divine substance", "hidden sweetness"! But Clare goes on to shift the entire context for interpreting this seemingly traditional description of contemplation, transforming these images of transcendence with an emphasis on the immanence of the contemplative experience:

And, after all who ensnare their blind lovers in a deceitful and turbulent world have been completely passed over, may you totally love Him Who gave himself totally for your love, at whose beauty the sun and the moon marvel, whose rewards and their uniqueness and grandeur have no limits; I am speaking of Him, the Son of the Most High, whom the virgin brought to birth and remained a virgin after his birth [3LAg 15-17] (*Et omnibus quae in hoc fallaci mundo perturbabili suos caesos amatores illaqueant [ms.: illaqueat] penitus praetermissis, illum totaliter diligas, qui se totum pro tua dilectione donavit, cuius pulchritudinem sol et luna mirantur, cuius praemiorum [abundantiae] et eorum pretiositatis et magnitudinis non est finis; illum dico Altissimi filium, quem Virgo peperit, et post cuius*

⁶⁴ Clare: *Early Documents*, 356; *Bullarium Franciscanum* I, 236-237.

⁶⁵ Clare: *Early Documents*, 51, adjusted; OMAECHEVARRIA, 396.

partum Virgo permansit. Ipsius dulcissimae Matri adhaereas, quae talem genuit filium, quem caeli capere non poterant, et tamen ipsa parvulo claustro sacri uteri contulit et gremio puellari gestavit)⁶⁶.

Here Clare identifies the mirror, “the image of the Godhead itself” with the incarnate Son of Mary, Jesus “who gave himself totally” for the love of Agnes. Clare focuses on the self-emptying of the Incarnation of the *Altissimi filium*, the Most High Son, which for her points to the kenotic dimension of God’s love. This association of “Most High” with the Son of Mary appears always in the context of Jesus as the example of poverty in the writings of Francis and Clare. It is this connection of poverty and Christology which Clare insists on in her correspondence with Agnes, because this is at the heart and center of Clarian life and experience: the incarnation of poverty of the “Most High Son” is both the motive for insisting on absolute poverty as well as the object of contemplation for Clare and her sisters.

After the next verses that reflect on the implications of this redefinition, Clare comes to her conclusion:

As the glorious virgin of virgins carried [Him] materially, so you too, by following in his footprints, especially [those] of humility and poverty, can, without any doubt, always carry him spiritually in your chaste and virginal body, holding him by whom you and all things are held together... [3LAg 24-26] (*Sicut ergo Virgo virginum gloriosa materialiter, sic et tu, sequens eius vestigia, humilitatis praesertim et paupertatis, casto et virgineo corpore spiritualiter semper sine dubitate omni portare potes, illum continens, a quo tu et [ms. et tu] omnia continentur [...]*)⁶⁷.

Contemplation which leads to union with God becomes in Clare’s experience the practice of the *sequela Christi vestigial Altissimi filium*– the following of the Most High Son’s footprints – in poverty and humility. Clare emphasizes the “material” following of Christ in “humility and poverty,” not an otherworldly contemplative embrace of the “Mirror of Eternity”! While Gregory would emphasize poverty for the sake of spiritual marriage and its attendant focus on contemplation of the transcendent God, Clare subsumes contemplation into the material life of poverty expressed as a concrete or material carrying of Christ in one’s body expressed as kenotic self-giving love at San Damiano.⁶⁸

Clare’s Theology of Poverty in Synthesis

Clare’s Fourth Letter to Agnes contains a fully developed exposition of Clare’s theology of poverty, and includes at the same time her most extensive citations of the Song of Songs. Writing to Agnes, Clare celebrates Agnes’ marvelous espousal «to the spotless Lamb, who takes away the sins of the world» (4LAg 8). She goes on to describe the “spotless Lamb» as «the radiance of eternal glory [who] is the brightness of eternal light and the mirror without blemish» (*Quae cum sit*

⁶⁶ *Clare: Early Documents*, 51; OMAECHEVARRIA, 396-397.

⁶⁷ *Clare: Early Documents*, 51; OMAECHEVARRIA, 397-398.

⁶⁸ See the comments of THOMAS HERBST, “The Evolution of Plato’s Mirror: Kenotic Poverty in Clare of Assisi’s Letter to Agnes of Prague”, *Antonianum* 84 (2009) 497-514, here, 508-511.

splendor aeternae gloriae, candor lucis aeternae et speculum macula) [4LAg 14]⁶⁹. As in the third letter, Clare juxtaposes images of transcendence and immanence: The lamb who was slain is at the same time the eternal light and mirror without blemish, that is the *Altissimi filium!* And so, she invites Agnes to «gaze upon that mirror each day, o queen and spouse of Jesus Christ, and continually study your face in it...» (v. 15), that is, «that mirror, suspended on the wood of the cross» (v. 24).

This mirror of the cross reflects «Blessed poverty, holy humility and inexpressible charity» which one can contemplate throughout the entire mirror or cross⁷⁰. Clare then describes each dimension of the mirror in turn. The beginning or border of the mirror of the cross is «the poverty of him who was placed in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes» [v.19] (*Principium huius speculi, paupertatem positi siquidem in praesepio et in panniculis involuti*)⁷¹, which makes the usual connection for Clare and Francis between incarnation and poverty. The middle or surface of the mirror reflects «the holy humility, at least the blessed poverty, the untold labors and punishments that he endured for the redemption of the whole human race» [v. 22] (*In medio autem speculi considera humilitatem, saltem beatam paupertatem, labores in numeros ac poenalitatem quas sustinuit pro redemptione humani generis*)⁷². This dimension of the cross connects humility and poverty with ordinary experiences of living which for Clare are redemptive: labor and sacrifice, a common feature of the penitential experience of the Poor Sisters. The end or the depth of the mirror is «the ineffable charity that he chose to suffer on the tree of the cross and to die there the most shameful kind of death» [v. 23] (*In fine vero eiusdem speculi contemplare ineffabilem caritatem, qua pati voluit in crucis stipite et in eodem mori omni mortis genere turpiori*)⁷³. At this its deepest dimension, the mirror of the cross reflects the ineffable redemptive charity of Jesus, the motive for poverty and humility. With this dynamic image of the mirror of the cross, Clare is describing her and Agnes' spouse, whose espousal in poverty, humility and charity, takes place in this world in the everyday commitment of the sisters to follow the footprints of the “Most High Son of God”.

This word picture describing the cross is then followed by a collage of verses taken from the Song of Songs which function as an invitation to intimacy with this crucified spouse⁷⁴. Union with God is accomplished by following the footprints of Christ, specifically, poverty, humility and charity. Embodying these footprints in life effects the contemplative transformation of spiritual espousal with the poor crucified Christ. Clare's focus is always on the poor crucified Christ.

⁶⁹ *Clare: Early Documents*, 55; OMAECHEVARRIA, 402.

⁷⁰ *Clare: The Lady*, 55; OMAECHEVARRIA, 402.

⁷¹ *Clare: The Lady*, 56; OMAECHEVARRIA, 402-403.

⁷² *Clare: The Lady*, 56; OMAECHEVARRIA, 403. This echoes again what Clare write in chapter six of her Rule when she describes how Francis saw the Poor Sisters living at San Damiano.

⁷³ *Clare: The Lady*, p. 55; OMAECHEVARRIA, 403.

⁷⁴ “Draw me after you, let us run in the fragrance of your perfumes (*Song* 1:3), O Heavenly Spouse! I will run and not tire, until you bring me into the wine-cellar (*Song* 2:4), until your left hand is under my head and your right hand will embrace me happily (*Song* 2:6), you will kiss me with the happiest kiss of your mouth (*Song* 1:1)” [(4LAg 30-31). For an in depth analysis of the use of the Song of Songs in the Fourth Letter to Agnes consult, FREDERIC RAURELL, “La lettura del *Cantico dei cantici* al tempo di Chiara e la *IV Lettera ad Agnese di Praga*, especially 247-275, in DAVIDE COVI e DINO DOZZI, *Chiara: Francescanesimo al Femminile*, Bologna, 2004, 188-289.

Thus, these four letters of Clare to Agnes present the theology of poverty as a re-definition of the tradition of spiritual espousal with Christ as a response to Pope Gregory, and at the same time they provide for Agnes and her sisters in Prague a theological understanding of the foundation for their life together. While Agnes and her sisters did receive a Privilege of Poverty from Gregory IX with his letter *Pia Credulitate tenentes* of April 12, 1238, this was only to be followed a month later by Gregory's refusal to allow them to observe the *Forma vitae* of Clare and her sisters at San Damiano⁷⁵. In the light of this refusal, Clare continued to propose her Christology to Agnes, a Christology that implied a specific style of life and practice of poverty that differed from the understanding of Gregory IX as this continued to be expressed in his correspondence with Agnes.

Clare Writes Her *Forma Vitae*

It seems that after Innocent IV attempted to impose his revision of Hugo/Gregory IX's rule for the monasteries of the Order of San Damiano with his own rule in his letter *Quoties a nobis* of August 23, 1247, Clare and her sisters began writing down her own form of life which was eventually approved a year prior to her death by Cardinal Rainaldo, and then by Innocent IV on her deathbed in 1253. With their publication of a "Chromatic synopsis" of Clare's *Forma vitae*, the Poor Clares of Umbria and Sardegna have demonstrated how the text of San Damiano's rule represents a living conversation between the Sisters at San Damiano and a large number of written and living sources⁷⁶. The skeletal system on which these sources are grafted is the lived experience of Clare and her sisters at San Damiano. It is interesting to note that in the text of their *Forma vitae*, the Poor Sisters never cite the Song of Songs, nor do they engage the tradition of spiritual espousal which Gregory IX used in his correspondence and which Clare and the sisters reinterpreted in the *Letters to Agnes*. This is not to suggest that the spirituality of spiritual espousal had no meaning or value at San Damiano. That it did have value is demonstrated by the reinterpretation of that tradition developed in the letters to Agnes as has been suggested. But in their *Forma vitae*, the poor sisters articulated the essential commitments and practices that defined their life, and which served as the pattern for their own spiritual growth. There is nothing in the text of Clare's rule that does not serve the purpose of describing and determining the concrete parameters of existence for the Poor Sisters. The spiritual transformation that results from living this *forma vitae* is experienced primarily as the practice of poverty and sisterhood in charity which transformed San Damiano itself into a mirror of the poor crucified Christ, which Clare and the sisters then articulated in the key of spiritual espousal to the poor Christ in the letters to Agnes.

At the center of Clare's *Forma vitae* are the two foundational pillars which have been described at the outset of this paper, that is, absolute poverty and the connection with the Lesser Brothers. Around these two pillars revolve every aspect of their life together at San Damiano, and they serve at the same time as the criteria with which the sisters discerned how the tradition, both the

⁷⁵ GREGORY IX, *Angelis gaudium*, *The Lady*, 360-362.

⁷⁶ *Sinossi cromatica*, 12-19. The sources include documents from the Papacy and the papal curia, Francis of Assisi and his Rules and Testament, the Pre-Narbonne constitutions of the Lesser Brothers, the *Memorial* of Thomas of Celano, the Rules of Benedict and Augustine, Caesar of Arles Rule for virgins, the Rule of the Trinitarians and the Institutions for the Monastery of Nuns at San Sisto in Rome, the Customs of the Dominican Sisters of Monte-Agri, along with other minor sources.

specific Franciscan tradition to that point in their history, and the more general tradition of norms and spirituality for women's monasteries, would be adapted to life at San Damiano⁷⁷.

Clare establishes the connection with the Lesser Brothers from the outset of the text, in terms of obedience where she affirms that «Just as at the beginning of her conversion, together with her sisters she promised obedience to the Blessed Francis» (1,4), and her successors would promise obedience to the successors of Francis. At the beginning of chapter six this obedience is recalled again as the basis for the connection with the brothers and their life of poverty as articulated in the texts of Francis recorded there: «Shortly after his own conversion, I, together with my sisters, willingly promised [Francis] obedience» (6,1). At the end of the rule this connection is recalled as the basis for Clare's request from the Order of Friars Minor for a chaplain plus a companion and two lay brothers «in support of our poverty, as we have always mercifully had from that Order of Lesser Brothers...» (12,5-6). These texts underline the essential connection between the life of poverty and the life of sisterhood and brotherhood that linked San Damiano with the Lesser Brothers in a mutuality of life and relationship.

As noted above for Clare, poverty is exemplified in the poor and crucified Jesus Christ and he is placed at the center of the rule in chapter six. Poverty is concretely defined there as the rejection of «anything that might be reasonably called ownership» (6,14). The poverty of Christ become the norm for entrance into the community: those who are determined suitable for the life «should go and sell all that she has and take care to distribute the proceeds to the poor» (2,7). Christ's poverty also becomes the norm for the clothing of the sisters: «Out of love of the most holy and beloved Child wrapped in poor little swaddling clothes and placed in a manger and of his most holy mother, I admonish, beg, and encourage my sisters always to wear poor garments» (2,24). The sisters are to work with their hands, and this is to be assigned in chapter «in the presence of all» (7,3).

This practice of poverty is to be reflected in the quality of relationship between the sisters themselves: «Let each one confidently make her needs known to another. For if a mother loves and cares for her child according to the flesh, how much more attentively should a sister love and care for her sister according to the Spirit?» (8,15-16). This attentiveness and service must be especially modeled by the Abbess who is «to preside over the others more by her virtues and holy behavior than by her office, so that moved by her example, the sisters may obey her more out of love than out of fear» (4,9). The Abbess must «console the afflicted» and be «the last refuge for those who are troubled» (4,11-12). The Abbess should be so familiar with her sisters that «they can speak and act with her as ladies do with their handmaid. For this is the way it must be: the abbess must be the handmaid of all the sisters» (10,4-5). Behind each of these prescriptions lies the image of Jesus, the poor and humble servant of all who is the basis for San Damiano's kenotic vision and experience of authority.

⁷⁷ See the excellent analysis of the text by Chiara Agnese Acquadro & Chiara Christiana Mondonico, OSC, «La Regola di Chiara di Assisi: Il Vangelo come forma di vita», in *Atti del Convegno Internazionale Clara Claris Praeclara. L'esperienza crisitiana e la memoria di Chiara d'Assisi in occasione del 750° anniversario della morte*, Assisi 20-22 novembre 2003. (Assisi: Edizione Porziuncola, 2004), 147-232 (also published in *Convivium Assisiense* 6 [2004]).

In speaking about how the sisters must relate among themselves, the *forma vitae* challenges the sisters to avoid «detraction and murmuring, dissension and division.» Rather, they should «be always eager, however, to preserve among themselves the unity of mutual love which is the bond of perfection» (10,7). Clare brings together in this one sentence three biblical texts in order to describe the quality of charity that must exist in the community⁷⁸.

Certainly there is much more in San Damiano's *Forma vitae* that could be presented here, but these three dimensions of the life of the Poor Sisters - poverty, humility as service, and charity - are also the practices reflected in the mirror of the cross which Clare developed in her letters to Agnes, but they are presented here in the Rule, one might say, without the tiniest gloss of the tradition of spiritual espousal proposed by Gregory IX.

Clare's Testament

Finally, Clare's *Testament* reiterates the convictions of the sisters at San Damiano concerning their commitment.⁷⁹ There is coherence between the central affirmations in this text that reflect the lived convictions of the sisters at San Damiano concerning the meaning of their life with the content of their *Forma vitae*. First, there is the clear declaration of the center of the observance at San Damiano: «The Son of God has become for us the Way that our blessed father Francis, his true lover and imitator, has shown and taught us by word and example» [v.5] (*Factus est nobis Filius Dei via, quam verbo et exemplo ostendit et docuit nos beatus pater noster Franciscus, verus amator et imitator ipsius*)⁸⁰. Second, what Francis showed Clare and her sisters was that just «as the Son of God never wished to turn away from this holy poverty while He lived in the world» (v. 35), so Francis «having imitated His footprints,» gave Clare and her sisters «many writings that, after his death, we would in no way turn away from it» (v.34)⁸¹. Jesus who never wished to turn away from poverty in his life is he «who was placed poor in the crib, lived poor in the world, and remained naked on the cross» [v.45] (*[...] qui pauper positus est in praesepio, pauper vixit in hoc saeculo, et nudus remansit in patibulo*)⁸², images of Christ that reflect the dimensions of the mirror of the cross Clare described in her fourth letter to Agnes.

The image of the mirror returns explicitly in the *Testament* but now it is used to describe the ministerial quality of the sisters' life of poverty. We read,

⁷⁸ Cfr. ACQUADRO&MONDONICO, «La Regola di Chiara di Assisi», pp. 168-172.

⁷⁹ For a synthesis of recent discussion concerning the authenticity of Clare's *Testament*, and an analysis of its content, consult MICHAEL W. BLASTIC, «The Testament of Clare», in *The Writings of Clare of Assisi: Letters, Form of Life, Testament and Blessing*. Studies in Early Franciscan Sources, volume 2. Eds. Michael W. Blastic, Jay M. Hammond, & J.A. Wayne Hellmann (Saint Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2011), pp. 109-133.

⁸⁰ *Clare: Early Documents*, 60; OMAECHEVARRIA, 345.

⁸¹ *Clare: Early Documents*, 62; OMAECHEVARRIA, 348: «*Nec contentus fuit in vita sua nos hortari multis sermonibus et exemplis ad amorem et observantiam sanctissimae paupertatis, sed et plura scripta nobis tradidit, ne post mortem suam ullatenus declinarem ab ipsa: sicut et Dei Filius, dum vixit in mundo, ab ipsa sancta paupertate nunquam voluit declinare*».

⁸² *Clare: Early Documents*, 63; OMAECHEVARRIA, 350.

For the Lord Himself has placed us as a model, as an example and mirror not only for others, but also for our sisters whom the Lord has called to our way of life as well, that they in turn might be a mirror and example to those living in the world” [vv. 19-20] (*Ipse enim Dominus, non solum posuit nos ut formam aliis in exemplum et speculum, sed etiam sororibus nostris, quas ad vocationem nostram Dominus advocavit (ms. advocabit), ut et ipsae sint conversantibus in mundo speculum et exemplum*)⁸³.

The life of poverty has a purpose beyond the personal transformation of the sisters themselves as the spiritual espousal tradition held. Poverty gives the life of the sisters at San Damiano ecclesial significance. In their life of poverty, humility and charity, these women mirror the way of salvation accomplished by Jesus Christ in his Incarnation and Passion. That is, in their life of poverty Clare and her sisters reflect and show forth in their own concrete footprints what it means to live the salvific experience of Jesus. Poverty, humility and charity, lived in the mutuality of sisterhood and brotherhood with commitment, rigor, and integrity, reveal Jesus who was made for us the Way. Theology and contemplation in the Franciscan – Clarian tradition, transforms the real lived experience of men and women into a living text of the gospel for others. Thus, for Clare and her sisters the meaning and implications of “holy poverty” had a significantly different meaning than for Gregory IX who viewed “most high poverty” simply as a condition for spiritual espousal and the life of contemplation. For Clare and her sisters, poverty and its practice was the Christological center of their life and commitment to live the gospel!

Conclusion

Poverty and Christology go hand in hand for Clare and her sisters. Their commitment to “holy poverty” was at the same time an expression of their experience and understanding of Jesus Christ and the gospel. Analyzing the texts which emanate from San Damiano there emerges a clear understanding of the theological implications of Clare and her sisters’ lifestyle and practices, who resisted attempts to alter the fundamental meaning of their life. Poverty was not simply one practice among others, but it was the core of the sisters’ commitment to follow the teaching and example of Francis of Assisi. Clare and the sisters at San Damiano reinterpreted papal theology in order to resist the imposition of structures and practices that did not fit with their evangelical experience of life. They were “theologians” in the true sense of the word. Their theology began with the gospel, passed through their lived experience, and was reflected upon in a living conversation that engaged in with many different voices – that of Francis and the lesser brothers, bishops, cardinal protectors, and popes. All the writings attributed to Clare bear the imprint of the shared experience and wisdom of the sisters who committed themselves to “holy poverty” by following the footprints of Jesus Christ.

(*) Articolo apparso in inglese in *Frate Francesco* 82/2 (2016), 267-298.

⁸³ *Clare: Early Documents*, 61; OMAECHEVARRIA, 346-347. For an exegesis of this passage consult DINO DOZZI, *Chiara e lo specchio*, 299-303, in Covi&Dozzi, 290-318.