

**Clare of Assisi's Spiritual Teaching and its Significance in Medieval
Monasticism and in Modernity**

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One of the first Franciscans, Clare is significant in the study of medieval monasticism. Whilst many view her as merely “a feminine variation” of Francis, her work deserves study in its own right.¹ She founded the Poor Ladies, now known as the Order of Saint Clare or, more commonly, the Poor Clares, and is considered the first female author of a monastic Rule. Due to her impact on Franciscan and female monasticism, Clare of Assisi presents herself as an excellent subject for study.

Five of Clare’s texts will be examined – her four *Letters to Blessed Agnes of Prague*, and *The Rule of Saint Clare*. A Rule is a systematisation of lives of a form of monasticism, and the letters demonstrate Clare’s monasticism in action on a personal level, hence both are important. The other works attributed to Clare are of questionable authenticity, with suggestions that “they may have been the conceptions of authors in the fourteenth or fifteenth century,” and whilst falsely attributed works are not entirely useless, these works will not be used here.²

This article will provide a study of these texts, presenting their spirituality, explain how they fit into medieval monasticism, and elucidate their relevance in modernity. To do this, this article will first provide historical context for Clare and the texts and then analyse the works. This is not a line-by-line commentary and so shall, instead, examine two of the key themes presented – poverty and spiritual friendships. This article will then examine how these themes fit into the trends of medieval monasticism, and how they are relevant today.

Clare was born into a family of minor-nobility and, even prior to her entry into monasticism was known publicly to be a holy woman, with the *Legend of Saint Clare* claiming that “the Spirit worked within her and formed her into a most pure vessel [...] and the report of her goodness was noised among the townspeople.”³

¹ Jesús María Bezunartea, *Clare of Assisi and the Discernment of Spirits*, trans. Paul Barrett (New York: Franciscan Institute of St Bonaventure University, 1994), 4.

² Ignatius C. Brady, “Clare of Assisi,” in *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works* (London: SPCK, 1982), 174.

³ *Ibid.*, 169; Lezlie S. Knox, *Creating Clare of Assisi: Female Franciscan Identities in Later Medieval Italy* (Boston: Brill, 2008), 21; Ignatius C. Brady and Paschal Robinson, trans., “Legend of Saint Clare,” in *The Legend and Writings of Saint Clare* (New York: Franciscan Institute of St Bonaventure University, 1953), 3-5.

It is almost certain that Clare first encountered Francis when she “heard him proclaim his message of penance and peace from the piazzas of Assisi” and it is possible she also heard him preach in the cathedral of San Rufino.⁴ It is questionable who approached whom with Ignatius Brady claiming she made arrangements to receive the advice of Francis, whilst Lezlie Knox believing that, having heard of her good nature and works, Francis “sought an introduction with her”.⁵ Regardless, they began to meet secretly, and Francis urged her to enter the religious life, which finally came to pass on Palm Sunday, 1212, when Clare left her home during the night to join Francis and the brothers at Santa Maria degli Angeli.⁶

However, it soon became apparent to Francis that a woman living the friar’s lifestyle caused problems, and her relatives were trying to persuade her to return home.⁷ Therefore, Francis moved Clare to the Benedictine convent at San Paolo delle Abbadesse where “she considered the community too lax to fulfil the life of poverty and penance she desired.”⁸ Shortly after, she was moved again to San Damiano, where she remained for forty-two years until her death in 1253.⁹

Her deep spirituality became well known, and many women flocked to join her, and “the “Poor Ladies” of Assisi became recognised as followers of the Poor Man of Assisi.”¹⁰ The fame of their monastery grew and new monasteries were established which, against the backdrop of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, meant that the Cardinal Deacon, Ugolino was appointed their protector.¹¹ Thomas of Celano, friar and hagiographer wrote within Clare’s lifetime that, “Clare arose a noble

⁴ Brady, “Clare,” 170.

⁵ Ibid., 170; Knox, “Clare,” 21.

⁶ Ibid., 21-22; Brady, “Clare,” 170.

⁷ Knox, “Clare,” 22; Brady, “Clare,” 170.

⁸ Knox, “Clare,” 22.

⁹ Brady, “Clare,” 170.

¹⁰ Ibid., 170-171.

¹¹ Ibid., 171.

structure of most precious pearls,” and praises Clare and her sisters for their charity, chastity, poverty and contemplation.¹²

At the Fourth Lateran Council, it was decided that all new religious communities must follow an established Rule, since no new ones were allowed to be written.¹³ So, Ugolino was eager to produce a canonical form for the Poor Ladies and in 1217 gave them “The Rule of Saint Benedict, the Constitutions of Saint Peter Damian” and, “somewhat later, the Constitutions of the Benedictine Monastery of San Paulo on Monte Subasio”, forming a Rule from the three.¹⁴ Then, in 1247, Pope Innocent IV formed another Rule for them.¹⁵

However, neither Rule satisfied Clare, as neither “contained the practice of intense poverty that Clare considered the heart of her religious commitment.”¹⁶ So, Clare began to write her own Rule which was approved by Cardinal Rainaldo, the new Protector of the Poor Ladies in 1252 and one year later, two days before Clare’s death, she received word of the papal bull *Solet Annuere*, which gave her final approval of her Rule.¹⁷ This Rule is one of the five documents that will be analysed in this article.

Agnes of Prague was born in 1203 and was the daughter of the King and Queen of Hungary.¹⁸ Despite attracting the romantic attention of many important men, including Emperor Frederick II, in 1232, she met the order of the Friars Minor and “soon built a church, a friary, and a hospital dedicated to Saint Francis”, becoming greatly involved in the spiritual life.¹⁹ Two years later, Agnes entered the monastery attached to the hospital and began to correspond with Clare, “whose life and

¹² *Ibid.*, 171; Thomas of Celano, “First Life of St Francis,” in *St Francis of Assisi: Omnibus of Sources*, trans., Placid Hermann (Quincy: Franciscan Press, 1991), 244, 245.

¹³ Brady, “Clare,” 209.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 189.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 189.

spirit she desired to emulate.” This is clearly an example of the fame of Clare.²⁰ Agnes stayed in her monastery for 54 years, until her death, and struggled to keep the same religious life that Clare did.²¹

The four letters show the correspondence between Clare and Agnes throughout their monastic lives.

Now that the texts have been placed in their historical context, this article will now examine two key themes presented by Clare – firstly, poverty. The Rule presents poverty as key to the life of a sister of the Poor Ladies. Right from the start it acknowledges that the main focus of a sister’s life is “to observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, by living in obedience, without anything of one’s own” – hence the lack of possessions is immediately being demanded.²² This is further shown as being important, as a key part of professing their way of life is “that she should go and sell all that she has and take care to distribute the proceeds to the poor.”²³ This is reiterated later in the *Rule* – “the sisters shall not acquire anything as their own, neither a house nor a place nor anything at all” but should “serve the Lord in poverty and humility”.²⁴

However, there are several aspects of monastic life in which it would be unsuitable or impractical to be entirely without property or material goods, but they still practise poverty. For example, the sisters are only allowed a small amount of clothing – three tunics and a mantle – and these are to be “the poorest of garments”.²⁵ The same concept is applied to food, with the sisters being obliged to eat sparse meals of meagre rations, other than at Christmas.²⁶ Moreover, the sisters and the monastery, should not “receive or hold onto any possessions or property [...] except as much land as necessity requires for the integrity and the proper seclusion of the monastery”, with the land not to be cultivated for selling the produce, but only for the limited dietary needs of the sisters.²⁷

²⁰ Ibid., 189.

²¹ Ibid., 189.

²² Clare of Assisi, “The Rule of Saint Clare,” in *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, trans. Ignatius C. Brady (London: SPCK, 1982), 1:1-2.

²³ Ibid., 2:4.

²⁴ Ibid., 8:1.

²⁵ Ibid., 2:6-18.

²⁶ Ibid., 3:7-8.

²⁷ Ibid., 6:5-6.

As a way of making sure the monastery does not become lax in their poverty, it is the Visitor's duty "to correct any excesses against the form of [the] profession".²⁸ Therefore, the sisters are universally obliged to have a Visitor so they may always observe the poverty and humility of Jesus Christ.

So, in her Rule, Clare explicitly espouses poverty of the most extreme level that still allows the sisters to carry out their work. This is also exemplified in the letters, where Clare encourages Agnes to persevere in her poverty. The letters do not really provide any specific instruction about how to perform poverty, but instead show how pleased Clare is that Agnes has chosen a life of poverty, and why it is important to do so. The main reason Clare seems to be especially happy about Agnes' choice to live a life of poverty is because of the amount of earthly wealth and power that Agnes denied. As pointed out previously, she was born a princess and could have married the Emperor, had she wished, but she gave this up to live a life of poverty in monasticism.

Whilst poverty is thematic throughout the letters, it is especially prominent in *The First Letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague*, written around the time Agnes entered monasticism.²⁹ In this letter, Clare poetically parallels the heavenly gifts she will receive as a result of her impoverished, monastic life with the earthly gifts she would have received otherwise. Through a metaphorical marriage to Jesus Christ, as opposed to the Emperor, Agnes will "be chaste, [...] become pure, [...] and] be a virgin," because Christ's "power is stronger, [...] generosity more abundant, [...] love more tender, [...] and] courtesy more gracious."³⁰ Christ will adorn her "breast with precious stones," place "priceless pearls in [her] ears," and surround her "with sparkling gems" and place on her head "a golden crown as a sign to all of [her] holiness."³¹ This is done in an attempt to persuade an understandably hesitant Agnes that her poverty as part of the monastic life will win her "greater treasures in heaven rather than on earth, where rust does not consume nor moth destroy nor thieves break in and steal."³² In

²⁸ Ibid., 12: 1-4.

²⁹ Brady, "Clare," 190.

³⁰ Clare of Assisi, "The First Letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague," in *Frances and Clare: The Complete Works*, trans. Ignatius C. Brady (London: SPCK, 1982), 8-9.

³¹ Ibid., 10-11.

³² Ibid., 22-23.

this letter, Clare goes as far as claiming that poverty is the only way to salvation, arguing that “the kingdom of heaven is promised and given by the Lord only to the poor,” since “a person cannot serve God and Mammon,” the personification of material wealth and greed.³³

Clare further develops this Bridal mysticism, arguing that because of her rejection of earthly riches and imperial marriage, the “King Himself [will] take [her] to Himself in the heavenly bridal chamber.”³⁴ Clare continues to reiterate to Agnes that by giving up her earthly glory and riches, Agnes will “share always and forever the glory of the kingdom of heaven.”³⁵ Clare rejoices that, due to the enormous earthly wealth Agnes gave up, Agnes has “brought to ruin the subtleties of our crafty enemy and the pride that destroys human nature and the vanity that infatuates human hearts.”³⁶

So the message heavily presented throughout the Rule and the letters is that poverty is desired and is crucial to Clare’s form of monasticism, and that it is crucial for receiving salvation and the eternal gifts of the Kingdom of Heaven. But what is Clare’s theological thought behind this notion? It is heavily based around the concept of imitating Christ in one’s life. This concept appears several times in the letters, explaining that God became “poor in this world, so that people who were in utter poverty and want and in absolute need of heavenly nourishment might become rich in Him by possessing the Kingdom of Heaven”.³⁷

The idea of imitating Christ is significant in Christian theology, and is particularly prominent in medieval monasticism. Christ presents to humanity in many ways the ‘perfect’ life without sin, and so in an attempt to live a good life, humans should try to live by Christ’s example. Since Christian doctrine dictates that Christ is one person of two natures, it is hard for mere humans to imitate

³³ Ibid., 25-26.

³⁴ Clare of Assisi, “The Second Letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague,” in *Frances and Clare: The Complete Works*, trans. Ignatius C. Brady (London: SPCK, 1982), 5-6.

³⁵ Ibid., 23.

³⁶ Clare of Assisi, “The Third Letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague,” in *Frances and Clare: The Complete Works*, trans. Ignatius C. Brady (London: SPCK, 1982), 5-6.

³⁷ Clare, “First Letter,” 19-20.

many aspects of Christ's life, but one potentially replicable attribute is that of poverty. Many previous monastic writers also espoused poverty, and it would have become particularly relevant at the time of Clare with the economic backdrop of the Commercial Revolution and the development of Italian city-states – where there was increased wealth not merely in the form of land but also in terms of monetary and material wealth.

This theological viewpoint seems to reflect the thought of Patristic thinker Cyril of Alexandria, who argued that, “if He who is rich does not impoverish Himself [...] then we have not gained His riches but are still in our poverty, still enslaved by sin and death.”³⁸ Following Cyril's thought, God, the most 'rich' being imaginable, became extremely impoverished for our salvation, and therefore, we should imitate Christ in order to gain this salvation. Whilst it is impossible to say for certain, it is extremely unlikely that Clare would have access to Cyril, especially considering that he wrote in Greek, a language she would not be familiar with, however this is a good example of how similar people in similar situations can think similarly, even if one is not influenced by the other.

Since Christ became ultimately impoverished for our salvation, humans should attempt to imitate Christ in this way. This is particularly why Agnes is so important to Clare – as a princess and potential wife for the Emperor, she was far wealthier than virtually anyone else, and whilst this is insignificant to the wealth of God, it still enables a greater sense of becoming impoverished than most, therefore imitating Christ in the fullest possible way for humans.

Now that the theme of poverty in the work of Clare has been explored, the concept of a spiritual friendship as presented by Clare shall be examined. The theme had become popular by the time of Clare, and the development of this will be discussed later. Clare and Agnes certainly were part of what could be considered a spiritual friendship – corresponding for over 20 years, despite never meeting in person. Firstly, it is very clear that Clare considers herself as a spiritual guide for Agnes.

³⁸ St Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, trans. John McGuckin (Chrestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 49.

She provides her with immense encouragement at the start of her monastic life in *The First Letter* – pointing out the benefits which monasticism will bring Agnes. She also reassures her, which is important considering Agnes is about to enter a life of extreme poverty and asceticism which would be daunting even for the most staunch monastic. Throughout the other three letters, Clare continues to assure Agnes that she has made the right choice by entering into monasticism. She also offers her advice; for example, in her encouragement of Agnes not to abandon her life of poverty, Clare recommends that Agnes follows “the council of our venerable Father, our Brother Elias, the Minister General, so that you may walk more securely in the way of the commands of the Lord.”³⁹

Perhaps the most telling sign of Clare as a spiritual guide for Agnes is her reassurance after Agnes’ petition to the Pope for a new Rule was denied.⁴⁰ She reminds Agnes that despite the decision, she can “always rejoice in the Lord” and to not allow bitterness or sadness to overwhelm her.⁴¹

It is also apparent that the form of their friendship developed during their correspondence. Despite having a massive amount of respect for Agnes throughout their friendship, it is evident that during the *First Letter*, Clare considers Agnes as her junior spiritually. Whilst she has the upmost respect, the majority of the letter is spent explaining why living a life of poverty is good, indicating that Agnes either was not entirely aware of this, or that Clare felt she needed support before entering the monastic life. But, by the time of the *Fourth Letter*, Clare addresses Agnes as almost a spiritual equal – rejoicing in Agnes’ total “abandonment of the vanities of this world,” comparing her to Mary, which for Clare is extremely high praise.⁴² She also uses beautiful imagery, paralleling Agnes to Mary – “just as the Virgin of virgins” carried Christ “materially”, Agnes, “following in His footprints [...]

³⁹ Clare, “Second Letter,” 15.

⁴⁰ Clare, “Third Letter,” 10-11.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

⁴² Clare of Assisi, “The Fourth Letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague,” in *Frances and Clare: The Complete Works* (London: SPCK, 1982), 7-8.

especially of poverty and humility” can carry Him spiritually in her “chaste and virginal body.”⁴³ Again, this is extremely high praise, indicating that Clare now considers Agnes her spiritual equal.

Another key feature of this friendship is the emotion involved between the two, shown specifically in the *Fourth Letter*. Clare is upset that she has not been able to write to Agnes, assuring her that it is not out of decreased love.⁴⁴ Clare then brings the use of the mirror analogy into play, which was common at the time. The idea is that the mirror reflects divine beauty for the virtuous, and Clare comments that when Agnes looks into this metaphorical mirror, shining back are “blessed poverty, holy humility and ineffable charity.”⁴⁵ This shows how much Clare has grown to love Agnes through their spiritual friendship.

Moreover, Clare acknowledges that due to age and quickly decreasing health, this is definitely the final time that she will write to Agnes. It is quite moving to witness the end to the earthly aspect of this spiritual friendship, with Clare acknowledging that she held Agnes “dearer than all others,” and the poetic expressions that follow demonstrate how much this spiritual friendship meant to Clare.⁴⁶ The love Clare has for her “blessed daughter” “can never be fully expressed by the tongue of the flesh and even what” Clare has written, she considers “an inadequate expression.”⁴⁷

The Rule of Saint Clare, however, seems to suggest that spiritual friendships are not a good idea – the Abbess “should avoid particular friendships, lest by loving some more than others she caused scandal among all.”⁴⁸ However, it is likely that this rule is merely for the Abbess to follow, as not to have favourites among her sisters. It also is very similar to the clause in the Benedictine Rule, which forbids people in authority from having friends, so could merely be a continuation of this.⁴⁹ Clare’s Rule also says that for less experienced sisters, the Abbess shall carefully provide a Mistress for them

⁴³ Clare, “Third Letter,” 24-25.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 4-6.

⁴⁵ Ingrid Peterson, “The Letters to Agnes of Prague,” *The Writings of Clare of Assisi* (New York: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2011), 40; Clare, “Fourth Letter,” 18.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 34-36.

⁴⁸ Clare, “Rule,” 4:8.

⁴⁹ St Benedict, *The Rule of St Benedict*, trans. Timothy Fry (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 2:16-17.

among the “more prudent sisters of the monastery”, who shall “form them diligently in a holy manner of living and proper behaviour to the form of our profession.”⁵⁰ Whilst also in the form of a teacher, this Mistress is presented as a type of spiritual friend.

So, for Clare, the idea of spiritual friendships is very important for the development of sisters into the holy life suitable for monastics. This is particularly well demonstrated through her communication over many years with Agnes, which culminated in a great spiritual love between the two.

This article has now explored two of the main themes of spiritual teaching of Clare as presented in the texts. It will now examine how these texts fit into the history of medieval monasticism. Firstly, it shall examine how Clare’s encouragement of poverty, as explored above, fits in to the theme of poverty in medieval monasticism. Poverty is a very common attribute of monasticism. The Rule of St Benedict, which provides a base for many forms of monasticism, forbids personal possessions.⁵¹ This type of simple and basic living, however, espouses voluntary poverty not in order to imitate Christ or to imitate anyone else directly, but merely to be ascetic – another key function of many forms of monasticism.

Voluntary poverty in order to imitate Christ does, however, still have history within Christianity and monasticism. Whilst the early Church, who were not particularly interested in the ‘historical Jesus’, focussed their imitation on the Holy Spirit and martyrdom, Augustine believed that the imitation of Christ was the height of Christian life, and thus argued that Original Sin, the imitation of Adam, could be eliminated through the imitation of Christ.⁵²

This concept became even more popular in the 12th and 13th centuries. Bernard of Clairvaux considered humility and love as key attributes of Christ, and therefore believed that practicing them

⁵⁰ Clare, “Rule,” 2:14.

⁵¹ Benedict, *Rule*, 33.

⁵² Mary T. Clark, *Augustine* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 48.

was serving in obedience to the Church.⁵³ The Canons Regular were the next to take this concept up with Anselm of Havelberg writing that they were “poor men of Christ” (*Pauper Christi*), and “naked followers of the naked Christ” (*nudus nudum Christum sequens*), thus emphasising poverty as a major aspect of their imitation of Christ.⁵⁴ Shortly before Clare, the Dominicans were keen to imitate both the Apostles and Christ through teaching and poverty respectively, and Saint Francis sought to imitate Christ in many ways, among them obedience and poverty.⁵⁵ Slightly after the time of Clare, Thomas à Kempis, of the *Devotio Moderna* movement, wrote his very influential book, *The Imitation of Christ*, which provided specific instructions for this imitation, focussing, however, more on the imitating the interior life through withdrawal from the world.⁵⁶

The concepts of imitating Christ and poverty are important for medieval monasticism, but how exactly does Clare fit into this history? Her form of monasticism definitely continues this concept of imitational poverty, but really brought it to the focus of a monastic life, with Brady concluding that “her great contribution” to monasticism “consists in her untiring defence of the charism of poverty” despite being challenged by many authorities.⁵⁷ Brady argues that even Francis, the first recorded Stigmatic in history, did not have as much of an emphasis on poverty as Clare did.⁵⁸ Whilst Francis practiced poverty, this is more because his imitation of Christ in total obedience to the Father “promoted him not to cling to what was rightfully his but to empty himself,” whilst Clare’s self-imposed poverty was specifically in imitation of the poor Christ.⁵⁹ So, it seems that whilst imitating poverty was already a focus of many monastic forms, Clare really brought this to the forefront of the life of those in her Order.

⁵³ Jean Leclercq, “Introduction,” in *Bernard of Clairvaux, Selected Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 40.

⁵⁴ Anselm of Havelberg, “The Apologetic Letter,” in *Norbert and Early Norbertine Spirituality*, ed. Theodore Antry and Carol Neel (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2007), 34.

⁵⁵ Simon Tugwell, “Introduction,” in *Early Dominicans: Selected Writings* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1983), 19; Thomas of Celano, *Two Lives of Saint Francis*, accessed November 18, 2013, <http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/stfran-lives.asp>.

⁵⁶ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1952), 2:1:2-5.

⁵⁷ Brady, “Clare,” 177.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 181.

Spiritual friendship is also a recurring theme in medieval monasticism. Whilst it is often discussed as “a Christian virtue [...] or a symbol of the divine life of the Trinity,” it is clear that this was a relatively uncommon view to hold, with many monastics being “very reserved” in its appreciation of the value of friendship.⁶⁰ Moreover, the idea of friendship met a problem in that Benedict’s Rule opposed any kind of faction or favouritism.⁶¹ But, as the medieval period developed, letters devoted to the expression of friendship became a very popular genre and Anselm produced a considerable body of correspondence, whose purpose is “the expression of friendship and the development of a theology linking human relationships with the love of God.”⁶²

As shown previously, the work of Clare, especially her letters to Agnes, show that she was completely in favour of the use of spiritual friendships. Despite being against St Benedict’s Rule, it is probable that Clare would argue this was merely for the Abbot or Abbess with regard to those in their particular monastery, in order not to show favouritism for some.

This article will go on to briefly examine how Clare’s spirituality is relevant in today’s contemporary society. As of 2011, there are over 20,000 Poor Clare nuns in more than 70 countries, showing the influence that the work of Clare still has.⁶³ They also continue to live according to *The Rule of Saint Clare*; however, in many ways this has had to be adapted to a way suitable for living in the modern world. For example, the abject poverty expressed by Clare is not practiced to the same level, and whilst Clare simply did not want any form of possession, with the sisters only working to produce sufficient for themselves, modern sisters belonging to the Poor Clares often have possessions or produce items, for example cards or candles.

Instead, the emphasis on poverty seems to have shifted in today’s spirituality to aiding the poor. Leonardo Boff, using the work of Francis and Clare as his base, wants to bring into focus the ideas of

⁶⁰ Douglas Ruby, “Introduction,” in *Spiritual Friendship* (Washington D.C.: Consortium Press, 1974), 15.

⁶¹ Benedict, *Rule*, 2:16-17.

⁶² Ruby, “Introduction,” 16.

⁶³ Patricia Proctor, “Poor Clare Sisters: Surrounding the World with Prayer,” accessed November 19, 2013, <http://poorclare.org/>.

gentleness and compassion.⁶⁴ This is perhaps not surprising considering that Boff was writing during a period of great political and economic injustice in Brazil – which is very different from the situation Francis and Clare were working in. Hence, Boff and his contemporaries are taking the ideas presented by Clare and Francis, of an imitation of Christ and focus on the poverty of Christ, and transferring them into a form of liberation theology. Liberation theology is an interpretation of Christianity with a focus on the suffering of the poor and their struggle.⁶⁵ Whilst many may believe this work of Boff is a betrayal of Clare’s ideals, it is more a reinterpretation in different circumstances. Clare was writing at a time of economic and commercial revolution, but in times and situations where poverty is already rife, the emphasis must be changed. Moreover, in her Rule, Clare does say that when the possessions of the sisters are sold, the proceeds are to be given to the poor.⁶⁶ Many theologians such as Clair Linzey have recently drawn connections between the work of Clare and Francis, and Pope Francis, with a focus on aiding the poor.⁶⁷

Clare’s determination to live a life imitating Christ can also be very relevant for spirituality in modernity. As previously explained, Christ supposedly lived a perfect, sinless life, and so is the perfect example for humans. Although obviously today’s world is immensely different from the world Christ lived in, there are many similarities, such as war, economic and political injustice and ethical controversies, and we can learn a lot from imitating how Christ dealt with situations. So, a modern spiritual life should encompass self-imposed poverty, but should realise that, as humans, we are limited in the extent to which we can imitate Christ. Instead, living a life of partial poverty, that is without luxuries, is more reasonable – which still keeps a firm focus on poverty and helping the poor and those less fortunate than oneself.

⁶⁴ Leonardo Boff, *Francis of Assisi: A Model for Human Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006), 23-25.

⁶⁵ Phillip Berryman, *Liberation Theology: The Essential Facts about the revolutionary Movement in Latin America and Beyond* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1987), 4-7.

⁶⁶ Clare, “Rule,” 2:4.

⁶⁷ Clair Linzey, “Fraternity with All Beings? - Leonardo Boff, Saint Francis and Pope Francis” (paper presented at the meeting of the Centre for the Study of Religion and Politics, University of St Andrews, November 21, 2013).

Poverty and humility are the praxes which enable fraternity, which lead onto Clare's focus of spiritual friendships. In a modern world involving social networking and increased mobility, the concept of friendship has been heavily diluted. However, this is arguably even more reason for deep spiritual friendship – such as the loving friendship shown between Clare and Agnes. Recently, Mary DeTurrís Poust has written that it is a healthy part of Christianity to have at least one friend that one feels free to discuss God and pray with, who can help on one's quest for God and that this deep friendship can help people to fulfil their full spiritual potential.⁶⁸

So, with the continued existence of the Poor Clares, the influence of Clare on the spiritual life in today's religious community is evident. Furthermore, aspects of Clare's teaching, namely poverty as imitation of Christ and spiritual friendships, also still have a key importance to spirituality.

This article has now set *The Letters of Saint Clare to Blessed Agnes of Prague* and *The Rule of Saint Clare* in their historical and theological contexts, and has examined Clare's teaching of poverty and spiritual friendships presented in them. It then examined how the teaching of Clare fits into the development of medieval monastic spirituality and explored the relevance of Clare's spiritual teaching, as presented in these texts, in today's contemporary society.

It can be concluded that Clare's main spiritual focus is to imitate Christ through a life of poverty – which she considers to be the most important replicable aspect of Christ's life. This is very evident throughout her Rule, in which poverty is an intrinsic part of life – it is a prerequisite for entry into the order, decides what clothes the sisters are allowed, and insists on fasting for the majority of the year. This is also explained to Agnes throughout the letters, especially *The First Letter*, with an explanation that it is important to imitate Christ in becoming impoverished, so that one may gain heavenly riches, which are incomparably better and longer-lasting than earthly wealth. Another

⁶⁸ Mary DeTurrís Poust, *Walking Together: Discovering the Catholic Tradition of Spiritual Friendship* (University of Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2010), 7-15.

important point of Clare's spirituality is the importance of spiritual friendships – especially shown with her correspondences with Agnes.

The work of Clare on the importance of poverty as imitation of Christ fits in well with the general trend of medieval monastic spirituality. However, what she did was really bring it to the forefront and as almost the sole focus of an imitation of Christ. This is still significant in today's society, but for many reasons, the emphasis can be changed into more of a consideration for the poor and a more reasonable form of self-imposed poverty. The concept of spiritual friendship, exemplified beautifully by Clare and Agnes, also remains an important aspect of a modern spiritual life.

So, the work of Clare shows many powerful themes of monastic spirituality which are important not merely in the context she was writing in, but also in modernity. Many may treat Clare simply as a female exponent of the work of Francis, but she is actually a very significant monastic writer in her own right.

In a further study, it would be useful to examine more themes presented in the work of Clare, such as the importance of contemplative prayer. It would also be interesting to examine more thoroughly the spiritual friendship with Francis, as well as that with Agnes.

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