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Contemplation with St Francis and St Clare of Assisi

Song: **O nobilissima viriditas**
(Hildegard of Bingen, 1098-1179)

Prayer: Before the Crucifix of San Damiano (St Francis)

St Francis and St Clare of Assisi: some biographical notes

- 1182 Birth in Assisi - family of rich cloth merchant
- 1198 Uprising of the merchant class against the nobility
- 1202-9 War between Assisi and Perugia
- 1204 Francis goes to war against Perugia and is taken prisoner
- 1205 He is ransomed by his family - illness and soul searching
- 1206 Conversion - Prayer before the Crucifix "Rebuild My Church"
- 1209 Others join him - the Pope approves his rule
- 1210 Francis preaches at Assisi
- 1215 Participates (with St Dominic) at 4th Lateran Council
- 1217 Meeting of the Franciscans: 5000 around St Francis
- 1219-20 Francis in the Holy Land
- 1221 Founding of the Franciscan Third Order for Lay people
- 1223 Celebration of Christmas with the 1st Crib
- 1224 Francis received the stigmata on Mt. Verna
- 1225 Very ill, blind, composes the Canticle of the Creatures
- 1226 Death
- 1228 Canonisation - His life written by Celano

St Clare:

- 1193 Birth into a noble family
- 1198 Her family has to flee the riots
- 1203-05 Exiled in Perugia
- 1210 Clare listens to Francis preaching
- 1210-12 Many secret meetings with Francis
- 1212 Evening of Palm Sunday - she flees from home and is
consecrated by Francis and his companions at Our Lady of the Angels
short stay with the Benedictines - then established at San Damiano from
where she never leaves
- 1214 Second convent formed by one of her companions
- 1215 Clare receives the title of Abbess

1216 The Pope grants her the Privilege of Poverty
1218 The Sisters receive their Constitutions with the Rule of St Benedict
1220 First convent outside Italy - Reims France
1224 Beginning of Clare's illness
1227 Pope confirms that the Franciscan Friars are to help the sisters
1228 First convent in Spain - Pope comes to visit her
1234 St Agnes, daughter of the King of Bohemia, becomes a Poor Clare nun
1240 The Saracens at San Damiano - Miraculous protection of the community
1241 Assisi besieged by the saracens : Fasting & Prayers of sisters - city is delivered
1245 Convents in central Europe: Poland, Moravia.....
1247 The Pope revokes rule of St Benedict and associates sisters to the Franciscans
1253 Pope visits Clare - she dies 2 days later on 11 August 1253 (753 years ago)
1255 Declared a Saint

Aspects that we found inspiring

Obviously, lives like those of Francis and Clare are of such richness, one could spend days on them. Four aspects which we found very rich to reflect on were

- 1) the Imitation of Jesus Christ that both Francis and Clare exemplified in their way of life
- 2) Humility and Freedom that flowed from that
- 3) the Privilege of Poverty that were for both at the centre of following in the footsteps of the poor Jesus Christ
- 4) Peace and their relationship with Nature so that God be praised by all in all.

In the short time we have today we will only reflect on two of them: Peace and Nature, before the tea break, and the Privilege of Poverty later in the afternoon.

As what is most striking about St Francis and St Clare are their radical choices in the way they lived, we will be mainly reflecting this afternoon on our own way of life to see how Clare and Francis can help us to move a little step towards that liberation that a total trust in God can bring.

1) Peace and Nature

St Francis is well known as the saint who talked to birds and loved nature. 800 years before our time, he had a unified vision of all nature and mankind being linked, and being one in God. He has been also an important inspiration for peace. These two aspects are linked.

In autumn 1219, Francis went to Egypt while the fifth crusade was on, besieging the town of Damietta. With one of his brothers he crossed the lines and asked to be introduced into the Saracen camp to see the Sultan of Egypt, Melek el Kamel. It is probably thanks to their simplicity that they were not killed. The Sultan, who was a peaceful man, welcomed them well and listened to them with interest. Francis spent a few days with him and was allowed to visit the Holy Land which was in the hands of the Saracen. This initiative is unique so far as Francis tried to propose an alternative way to the violent crusades while trying to contact the Saracen through peaceful means.

Francis is also said to have talked to a wolf which was threatening the inhabitants of Gubbio, near Assisi. He showed the inhabitants how to have compassion for the wolf who was simply hungry. They made him live in the village, fed him, and he did no more harm from then on.

It is said that Francis used to preach to the birds who listened to him and praised God in their song, when he told them to do so. He felt himself to be a fellow creature to all living being, all held in being and loved by the one God in Christ.

These attitudes of peace and love for nature are linked. Francis understood that when we feel something as a threat, it is often based on a misunderstanding of the nature of our opponent who should be treated in fact peacefully and lovingly. In reality we are all part of one another. Each of us has his or her role to play, as have the plants and the animals. There is no hierarchy but complementarity in diversity. We all need each other.

In his *Canticle of Brother Sun*, Francis describes this interdependence and the gifts we receive without interruption from nature and from our surroundings: everything is given: air, water, food, warmth, knowledge, grace...

According to the Gospel, the flowers in the field are our teachers because they show us the way to be faithful to and trusting in God. If they are our teachers, how could we treat them without respect or love?

When nature is no more just a resource, as it is the case in our society, but when the Earth becomes our sister and our mother, we are enriched by this relationship; we listen and we receive instead of grabbing.

In our civilisation which stresses individualism as the key to happiness, it is more difficult to experience the richness of the links which make a body out of our diversity. Not only do we depend on these relationships with the whole, but we are able to have a worthwhile life only if we remain conscious of belonging to the whole; the whole is more than the addition of the parts. By accepting to live with less rather than with more, we increase our chances that the awareness of our connectedness and our reliance and trust in God brings us freedom and joy.

Texts

Questions:

- What does a black snake represent for me? How do I react to its presence?
- What could help me to feel more peaceful in front of my opponent?
- Do I talk to the animals, the plants, the rocks? Do I ask them for forgiveness?

Prayer:

Let us pray for the peace in the world and for the healing of the ones we love. Please leave some long time of silence between two demands.

Sharing

TEA BREAK

2) Privilege of Poverty

One of the most powerful events in Francis' life is the encounter with the leper when he was still a young man, living in Assisi. Although he had always been scared of lepers, on this occasion he was impelled to jump down from his horse, to kiss him on the mouth and give him money, feeling an astonishing deep peace in himself. It transformed his life and opened the door of understanding to what is poverty, leading him to embrace poverty as a condition for following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. He understood how poverty, as extreme detachment, was also the key to spiritual freedom. This encounter was so important for him that he mentioned it in his testament where he tried to summarise the spirit of his Order he wished to leave as heritage. Francis, at the end of his life, felt bitter when he saw how many brothers started to care for better comfort and for a form of wealth in their convents, even if it was a very simple one. For him, it was denying the ideal of the Order, and going astray from the path of imitating the poor Jesus Christ. This conflict over the interpretation of the degree of poverty continued in the various Franciscan orders over centuries and led to various independent branches existing even into our days.

For Clare, the privilege of poverty was the most precious thing. She had to ask the Pope three times to confirm the privilege of poverty. What she wanted was that she and her sisters could not be forced to accept any property the Church authorities might want to give them. Clare and her sisters wanted to own nothing, neither individually nor communally. The usual set up in the religious orders of the time was for them to own land which would procure for them a regular form of income. This is why Clare had to ask again and again for what she called the Privilege of Poverty. The first Pope Innocent III was amused to sign something that had never been asked for before, but the two later Popes, Gregory IX and Innocent IV took much time to make up their minds and accept it. In fact, this principle of poverty was the centre of the rule she had herself written - never before in Christian history had a woman done so for her order - it had always been done by a man for them. The rule governed her and the sisters' life who had come to join her. The Pope came to see her with the approval of her Rule two days before she died. After Clare's death, the first change the hierarchy imposed on the Poor Clare sisters was to have them settled in a convent with a regular income, though the order is still one of the most austere ones.

St Clare had always seemed incredibly sure of what was necessary and what was right for her own path. Although of a gentle nature, she had a will of steel and a clear mind (Clare-sightedness!) about what was essential for her about the spiritual life and would fight with tenacity, patience and incredible strength of spirit for that. The privilege of poverty was certainly a main point for her. Having embraced a poor Jesus as her spouse, she wanted to share and be with her spouse in all the conditions of his earthly life. For her it was the basic condition for the transformation of mind and of lifestyle so that practice conforms with faith.

Clare was living a very tough life with her sisters: often they hardly had enough to eat. Yet from contemporaries of hers that were interviewed shortly after her death in view of her sanctification, we know that often an empty oil jug would miraculously be full, or a half loaf of bread when shared allowed each of the 50 or so sisters to have a good slice of it. Clare was very empathic and intuitively knew when a sister needed comfort, yet she could be too strict on herself and on her own body and Francis had to talk to her from time to time to be more moderate toward herself. Clare, although strict with herself, was always very caring for the well-being of her sisters in a kind of motherly way, like for instance getting up during the night to cover them so that they would not be cold.

While the brothers were mainly on the roads preaching, healing and living on alms and hospitality, the sisters were enclosed in their convents where they used to work very hard, although they could leave the enclosure for a good and serious reason. The produce of their work was given freely, essentially to parishes, and they lived also on alms as they had no income. The rule said the Friars and Sisters Minor could not have money; they could receive only food or what was necessary to cover their needs; they could not accumulate that either. The rule also said that when they worked somewhere they could not accept a leading position but had to do so at the lowest level possible. Their salary could not be paid as money either.

Poverty frightens us because it means insecurity and trust-in-God-only. Perhaps also because the docility sometimes seen in the poor may show the real eyes of Jesus: the God-Man who chose to come among us in such a humble aspect, to express how much he loves each one of us and how accessible He makes himself. He wants no obstacles between us and His Grace.

Texts

Questions:

- In our life, why do we need so much material security? Why can we not live in this trust-in-God-only?
- Try to imagine how it could be to live without possession, like the birds of the sky and the flowers in the fields.
- Think how much of our possessions are only a question of conformity, to look like others and feel secure because we conform to the usual pattern. What is in fact the right pattern, the deep pattern God calls us to live? What stops us living that?

Prayer:

- Contemplate the image of poverty that attracted St Francis until you feel more comfortable with it. Visualise yourself as living in some sort of poverty. Can you feel any freedom in it?
- Keep in your heart this equation: discerning the spiritual meaning of events / situations + poverty = new life in Christ (imitation).

Sharing