

**Death Anniversary of Mother M. Clara Pfaender**  
**October 5, 2019**  
**by S. Mary Lou Wirtz**

Who is this woman, Theresia Pfaender, later known as Mother Clara Pfaender, who founded our congregation 1860? How do we reflect on her essence? Coming to know M. Clara has been a process—not only with the unfolding of information about her life but coming to know her through our own spiritual unfolding and deepening.

In reflecting on M. Clara, I would like to begin with sharing some insights about her through the eyes of two other people: Pauline Mallinckrodt, the Foundress of the Sisters of Christian Charity; and Franciscan Capuchin, Fr. Donal O'Mahony, who spoke at our General Chapter in Rome in 1991.

Theresia Pfaender felt the call to religious life, and at the age of 23 she joined the Sisters of Christian Charity, a community newly founded by Pauline Mallinckrodt in Paderborn, Germany. Here she received the name Sr. Clara and was the 5<sup>th</sup> member of the new community. We can presume she learned much about the beginnings of a new foundation in the 10 years she was with this community. Mother Pauline cherished a special regard for Clara and saw her as a woman of rich experience and background, no doubt much of it coming from assisting her father in his office as Mayor. In 1854 when Pauline was considering Clara for handling a delicate task, she wrote in a letter to the Superior of the house where she was going: "Clara is so good at persuading people, she is a great lover of peace, and knows how to prove God's love of peacemakers." This says a lot about the character of Clara. Though Clara was happy with what she was doing, some doubts began to rise within her about whether she was in the right place. After a significant period of prayer and discernment, she made the decision to leave the Sisters of Christian Charity in 1859, to form her own community. It was painful for Pauline to say good-bye to Clara, but she knew this decision was made after much discernment and she supported her in her decision.

When Clara left the Sisters of Christian Charity, the first thing she did was walk to the Franciscan Church in Paderborn and became enrolled as a Third Order Franciscan. We may never know what drew her to do this, but this was obviously an important first step for her to take, as she would later place her community under the patronage of St. Francis.

Regarding the Franciscan way of life chosen by M. Clara, I would like to also share some reflections by Fr. Donal O'Mahony, given at our General Chapter in Rome in 1991. Having read about M. Clara's life and having read the Founding Constitution, Fr. Donal had this to say about her. He felt M. Clara caught the essence of Franciscanism in our 1860 Founding Constitution. He saw it as utterly Franciscan. He further reflected that he saw M. Clara as a courageous woman, who had a tremendous belief in and faith in Jesus Christ, and never relented in the face of problems with the Church, nor with the government. (The ecclesiastical authorities of her time saw her as stubborn!).

Another point I found interesting in Fr. Donal's reflection was that when M. Clara speaks of prayer for the Church, and reading what follows, it seemed clear to him that M. Clara's view of church was global. As a congregation we are not tied to a specific apostolate but are called to address whatever loving service is sent our way. Her vision for the community was clear. Fr. Donal also commented that M. Clara had focus and clarity about her life! She expressed at the beginning of her life: "I want to become holy at any cost."

When we look at the life of Francis and the words of today's Gospel, both Francis and Jesus often went "to the mountain" to pray. While M. Clara didn't go to a mountain to pray, the Eucharist and prayer before the Blessed Sacrament were sources of her strength. This was so important to her that she included this in her Founding Constitution. She organized her community around perpetual adoration. It was here the Sisters found the solitude and quiet, the peacefulness, the strength to carry out their service. For M. Clara prayer was "the breath of the soul", (FC CII) and there was no separation between the contemplative and active life; these were integrated.

The reading from Colossians today speaks of being clothed in compassion, generosity, humility, forgiveness—and over all these put on love. This is not so different than the emphasis M. Clara wrote in her Founding Constitution: "Let love be the queen, the rule, the spirit and the life of the congregation." (FC XXVIII) She calls her Sisters (us) to "bear a deep love for one another", (FC II) "to show one another the greatest possible charity in a loving manner; helping and accepting help; giving counsel and accepting counsel..." (FC XXVIII) Again, her message is clear.

M. Clara leaves us a rich legacy. She was a woman of great strength, of courage, of unwavering faith. She was indeed a victim of the Kulturkampf, and through grave misunderstandings was removed from office by ecclesiastical authorities; her good name was calumniated; and she lived in utter poverty in Rome, while trying to see the Pope to clarify all that happened. We know that through all this she never became embittered. Her faith remained strong and she always believed that "Our ways are mysteries of Divine Providence, which lead us according to God's will even though we do not understand it. We must be steadfast and not waver..."

M. Clara died in Rome on this day, Oct 5, 1882, with the words: "Come, St. Francis, I am ready."

It is up to us now to fan the flame ignited by M. Clara's spirit and to carry it forward. She herself wrote in the Founding Constitution: "Love is a fire that does not rest." (FC CII). We gather today as a tribute to M. Clara and to her life, and we engage with those who help us tend that flame. In doing so, our desire is that our corner of this vast global village will be ignited with this same spirit.

In closing I would like to add that M. Clara's good name was officially restored with the Church on Feb 1, 2018 in the Cathedral of Paderborn.