Today we celebrate the life of Clare of Assisi. Initially, when I took a look at the readings in the sacramentary in order to prepare for the reflection, I must say, I was jolted for a moment. August 11th is listed, and centered directly under the date is “Clare of Assisi, Virgin.” And I thought: “my goodness, this is the feast of Clare of Assisi! Couldn’t they think of something more to say than just ‘virgin’?” Of course, I know that the church generally categorizes saints with a single noun like “virgin” or “martyr” or “doctor.” However, in the enthusiasm of the moment, I wanted the page to bubble-out with a more effusive description of Clare - especially since the readings selected are so lush, so passionate and so uncompromising!

I thought they ought to begin with “Clare of Assisi, woman of passion, woman of power, woman who pioneered a lifestyle that revolutionized monastic and contemplative religious life!” Or it should read: “Clare, skinny-little-anorexic-hair-shirted-18-year-old who was rooted to the ground when 7 big burly cousin-knights in armor and on horseback tried to yank her away from her vocation and return her to her father’s house!” Or better yet, the sacramentary should read: “Clare who tangled over the privilege of poverty with 5 Popes and outlived 4 of them while being sick and undernourished but who was victorious!” Clare of Assisi was the first woman among hundreds of thousands of Franciscans! That’s noteworthy! The word “virgin” just didn’t say all that much to me. It seemed so minimalist.

Then, I decided to examine the archetype of the virgin in an attempt to flush out a richer meaning to the term than what our
culture generally ascribes to it. An archetype is an ancient and instinctual pattern of behavior contained in the collective unconscious - its something like our primordial soup. We, all of us, have many ancient patterns sloshing around in us. The archetype of the virgin is just one pattern among many, many, many others.

The virgin archetype refers to a state of the psyche or soul life. It does not limit itself to the physical state of virginity. The virgin archetype represents the independent, self-sufficient quality in a woman. When virgin is the dominant archetype, the woman is “one-in-herself.” She looks to no one to complete her. “A woman who is a virgin, one-in-herself, does what she does - not because of any desire to please another, not to be liked, or to be approved of - not because of any desire to gain power over another - to catch another’s interest or love, but because what she does is true to the truth she holds.”

She doesn’t adapt herself in order to comply with another’s expectations. She is not attached to people, outcomes, possessions, prestige or power. She is free of another’s judgment of her. She feels whole as she is. Her ego and identity are not tied to external circumstances. She is totally focused on that which has the greatest value for her.

It is that capacity in a woman to focus consciousness on what is deeply meaningful. Focused consciousness typifies the virgin archetype. It is the ability to concentrate the attention on what matters most - to become absorbed in the task at hand and what matters most. Her focused consciousness is like an intense beam of light, like a flame of fire, willfully directed, illuminating only what it is focused on, leaving everything outside of its radius in the dark or in the shadows.
Certainly Clare was a woman of such focus. The center of her every conscious moment was the Christ. It was a center that absolutely consumed her yet sustained her passion for life. T.S. Eliot describes such focus, or center, or stillpoint as a “white light, still but moving.” This is a great description for Clare. Her virginal contemplation of the Christ became “white light, still but moving.”

So, although I was looking for a more effusive description of Clare than “virgin,” I see it now as an excellent match. The rich and lush readings of today’s scripture are uncompromising in the demand for such single hearted focus - for such laser sharp contemplative gaze.

The Song of Songs of today’s reading describes the desire to be such a flame of fire, sealed or branded or burned into the very HEART of God. To me, it speaks of becoming a fire in the furnace of the Heart of God - “that no flood can quench, nor torrent drown! This was Clare!

Today’s gospel has Jesus insisting that everyone who leaves the preoccupations and the clutter that consume mindfulness, or our attention, and instead adopts a single-hearted focus on the Christ will inherit a new Life, a new way of being in God. When the gospel enumerates the leave-takings of relationships and properties that cloud our focus, we know, that these are not a leave-taking that occurs only once for us and then we are done with it. When I left the home of my parents at the age of 18, like you, I couldn’t say: “Well, I’m glad that’s done. There will be no more leave-takings for me!” I knew, like you, there were more goodbyes to come.
Every day we have innumerable opportunities to be sleepy or clouded, or to become attached to something that woos us away from becoming the Fire in the Furnace of the Heart of God.

In the life of Clare of Assisi, we have a woman who has gone before us. She assures us that our own energies for a virginal stance in the world - independent, true to the Christ-focus that we hold - is energy well spent. Clare’s feast day is an invitation to dare to experience, in the center of our own being “white light, still but moving.” We too, are invited to be absorbed in Love that is like the flame of fire in the furnace of the Heart of God.