

## Feast of Clare of Assisi

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Today, Franciscans across the world are partying again! It's the feast day of St. Clare of Assisi, a contemporary of St. Francis and a trail blazing woman who has helped shape our "Charism of Love" and from whom our Province of St. Clare has been named.

Clare was born in Assisi, July 16, 1194 and died there August 11, 1253 at 59 years old.

Though born into an affluent knightly home, from little on Clare had a sensitivity to the poor and less fortunate in her town often giving them food and alms to ease their poverty. This continued into her teenage years. It was through these years that she also met St. Francis of Assisi whom she greatly admired for his simple life, his practice of poverty, and his passionate love for Christ. These encounters with Francis and her own deep faith, strengthened her sense of call to give over her life completely to God.

The men in her family set a dowry aside for her and pressured her to marry a wealthy and prominent man in another family that would mutually result in strengthening the families' wealth and power in Assisi. Clare wanted none of this! On Palm Sunday at age 18 years, she slipped out the back door of her home at night and walked to the Portiuncula, a little church where Francis and the brothers met her. While there, the Community prayed for her and Francis performed the ritual of cutting off her hair. The cutting off of hair was a deeply spiritual ritual indicating that one's life was giving up worldly values like wealth, prestige, power and a commitment to live the Gospel virtues of Jesus. Clare then donned a simple coarse dress and was companioned by the brothers to a local religious women monastery.

Well, needless to say, the men in her family were livid about her choice, and also that she had given away her dowry to the poor. They used every tactic they could think of to dissuade Clare and get her back home. She was immutable! No "shrinking violet" our Clare!

After living for some time in two women monasteries whose rules were defined by men in the Church, probably okay then but not so much now, Francis realized that Clare was called to live “lady poverty” in a different way. Her sister, Agnes, joined her. Clare cut her hair and welcomed her. When the men in her family came to get her and take her home, her body became so heavy they could not lift her. A miracle in Clare’s life. Needless to say, the men in her family left unhappy.

Francis received permission to have Clare live in San Damiano, a semi abandoned little church at the edge of Assisi. It was there she lived with her Sisters for 48 years. Eventually her mom also joined her Community. These holy women lived simply, humbly, and prayerfully. The residents of Assisi greatly loved Clare and her Sisters and helped support them with food and alms.

It was at San Damiano that Clare lived with her Sisters for 48 years.

Clare’s extreme love for “lady poverty” and insistence on no ownership of anything and complete dependence of God can be puzzling for all of us today. But she lived in a society of upper- and lower-class citizens not unlike our country and times. We could attribute her rigorism about this as a challenge to societal classism as well as an admonition that no wealth, things, prestige, power should obscure our awareness that God is the center of our life and all comes from and belongs to our Creator God.

Clare, whose name means light, uses the images of a mirror in the correspondence to her sister Agnes urging her sister to look into a mirror until she sees the image of Christ looking back at her. As Paul says to the Corinthians (2 Cor 4) “God let light shine in our hearts that we in turn might make known the glory of God shining on the face of Christ. This treasure we possess in earthen vessels to make it clear that its surpassing power comes from God and not from us”. We are in Christ and Christ is in us. Alleluia (No wonder Franciscans party!)

Another value of Clare’s was work. She did believe “idle hands could be the devil’s workshop” and was herself weaving and spinning cloth for chapel corporals that were given away when she wasn’t joining with the Sisters doing gardening, caring for the sick and doing ordinary household chores. This is the path of holiness you are living too, as you work to support your families, raise your children and keep your households going.

Clare loved her Community of Sisters and was always solicitous about their needs. She urged them to talk with each other to make their needs known. And she often cared for them when they were ill. Miracles of cures are attributed to her

both during her life and after her death. There was a sweetness in her love for her Sisters. No one was received into the Community unless all the Sisters agreed to it. No hierarchical structure in her Community.

Lastly, reception of Christ in Eucharist set her heart on fire. The words “Jesus said to his disciples: Live on in me, as I do in you” was an unspeakable joy in her heart – as it is meant to be for us.

This remarkable woman whose life we celebrate today was a trail blazer who did not capitulate to her family’s wishes nor to the Church regarding the rule she wrote for her Sisters’ way of life. This rule was finally approved on her death bed. Clare was accessible, inclusive, warm, and welcoming to all who came to her for comfort or advice be they her Sisters, Franciscan brothers, laity, clergy or civic dignitaries. She was beloved to all in the little town of Assisi and is to all of us who celebrate her life and presence with us, past, present, and future. So, let us celebrate Christ in her and Christ in us!