

What Are We Doing?

Friar Bob Hutmacher, ofm

Stories abound about Francis and Clare of Assisi, sometimes nearly creating Hollywood layers of romantic involvement. They certainly knew each other but let me try to clarify their relationship as we near her Solemnity on August 11. Please celebrate her at all three Masses here!



Francis went through his own tumultuous conversion over a period of five years. He was touched by God in dramatic ways and struggled to turn from his rowdy and spendthrift style of living to what God asked of him. His change reached a dramatic split with his family before the Bishop of Assisi in 1206, after which he left the walls of Assisi to begin caring for lepers in the valley below the city.

Clare, on the other hand, lived a type of communal life with her mother, sisters and other women. The Offreduccio family was beyond wealthy, with five knights in the extended family and vast land holdings – the true source of medieval financial power. The young Clare had already developed a wonderful reputation of purity and holiness. She and others in their household cared for the poor and prayed together. She knew of Francis both before and after his conversion. He observed her manner of living and she certainly had lots of opportunities to watch him beg in town and hear him preach the joy and freedom of God's Kingdom.

Francis often predicted that San Damiano chapel, which he'd rebuilt himself, would be the home of women "whose life and fame will cause our heavenly Father to be universally glorified" (3 Soc 24). Ingrid Peterson, OSF, asked a question in her monumental book *Clare of Assisi*, [Franciscan Press, 1993]: "*Did Clare need Francis, or did Francis need Clare?*" His desire to have a female community at San Damiano certainly was in his mind and Clare did go to speak to Francis and a Brother Philip secretly. But medieval women could only live a common religious life in cloister. She listened carefully to God and made her decision to live the Gospel in "the footsteps of Francis".

When Francis broke with his family, it was an interesting move because his father could have disowned him legally; Francis sold fabrics he took from the family shop to finance the rebuilding of San Damiano. When Clare separated from her family there were even more financial implications because of her nobility status. She secretly sold off her own land holdings and gave proceeds to those in need and that crippled her family's finances. (More on this later!)

On the night of Palm Sunday, 1212, Clare and her companion, Pacifica, left the Offreduccio home for the last time and met Francis and a group of friars at the Porziuncola chapel in the valley. He cut her hair and invested her in a habit. Then, because it would cause a scandal if she lived with the friars, she was escorted to the Benedictine monastery in nearby Bastia. Family members charged into the chapel to retrieve her but Clare had already cut her hair, a sign of giving her life to God. After a brief stay there Clare there and another chapel, she finally settled in at San Damiano, thus fulfilling what Francis had proclaimed years before. Clare lived there until her death in 1253.

I've omitted tons of details about the stories of both saints but encourage you to read the most recent scholarly works about them. [Check our bookstore!] The stories are dramatic, yes, but you may just find similarities between their struggles and your life. Remember, saints don't get a halo until after death so be patient in your journey to holiness.

Why spend time about these saints and their conversion stories? Well, I asked “What Are We Doing?” and can also ask “What Are We Not Doing?” about own lives as people of the Gospel. I hold Francis and Clare deeply in my heart as primary examples of how to shape my own life and follow in the footsteps of Jesus. The energy and courage they exhibited in breaking with their families are monumental, but every human being experiences challenges and blessings.

The Bernadone family was in the merchant class, a rising “middle” class the nobility didn’t quite know how to handle because they owned businesses and could hold their own financially. The nobility, on the other hand, had all the power, land and homes on the top of the city, literally lording it over the entire population. Rich on top, middle folks between them and the poorest of the poor at the bottom. Perfect class structure of control. Francis had one brother, Angelo, so there was one other person to carry on the family business, but it did endanger their future financially and socially.

Clare’s break was devastating to her family. Clare established herself and a community at San Damiano, soon joined by her two sisters and eventually, their mother, Ortulana. Four women from one family sold their lands and distributed their wealth to those in need. The call of Christ to “go, sell what you have and give to the poor” was followed perfectly. This was financial ruin for the Offreduccio family! It is written that within five generations the family went out of existence because of these great losses.

The courage this woman and this man showed are touching once you enter more deeply into what it took for them to do what they did. And I ask myself all the time: what am I doing today that is courageous? How bravely do I proclaim God’s Kingdom of Peace with all God has given me?

I sent the June Legionnaire article to the printer just hours before the massacre in Uvalde; I sent the July article to the printer just days before the horror of Highland Park; I’m sending the August issue to the printer just days after Greenwood, Indiana. In the first six months of 2022 here in Chicago 343 people have been killed by guns; 270 were African American, 18 white, 53 Hispanic, 1 Asian, 1 unknown. [Sun-Times July 16, 2022]. In the political arena the divide between our two party system is vast and millions of dollars – MILLIONS – are spent on advertising that only aggravates a plethora of negative feelings and heightens national angst. The public hearings from the January 6 congressional committee reveal so much, yet millions of citizens refuse to see the truth. What are we not doing that our nation and our Church leaders have brought us to such a negative and lifeless point in time? Our *Mother, Sister Earth* is literally **burning up** around us and leaders refuse to admit global warming is a problem. What are we doing?

It is common to say “but what can I do? I’m just one person?” What did Clare and Francis do? They listened to God and followed the Gospel faithfully. And because of their courageous **yes** to God, the Church was taken off life support and given a transfusion of new life! These two saints even confronted popes – Clare argued with at least four about what she knew God wanted of her and was the first woman in Church history to write a rule for women religious. She held her own in a gracious but firm way, diplomatically respecting canon law and previous papal documents for women religious yet clung to Francis’ spirit. On August 9, 1253 Pope Innocent IV approved the Rule Clare had written. She was taken to the face of God two days later, a life abundantly fulfilled.

*I will rejoice heartily in the Lord,
My being exults in my God;
For God has clothed me with garments of salvation,
And wrapped me in a robe of justice.
As the earth brings forth its shoots,
And a garden makes its seeds spring up,
So will the Lord God make justice spring up,
And praise before all the nations.*

Isaiah 61:10



The image I love is: *clothed me with garments of salvation, wrapped me in a robe of justice.* That's the apparel of a prophet, as depicted on page 2 by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel. By virtue of our Baptism we are all anointed, like Christ who was anointed priest, prophet and king," to bring the Kingdom to those around us. "What can I do?" you ask. Anything and everything. This is why I love that image of being clothed with salvation and justice. We already have what we need to be a prophetic voice in favor of gun control. God has already called us to stand up for and live out racial equality. The maelstrom created by the U.S. Supreme Court challenges all of us to enter into civil discourse about life issues. [An aside: I saw the height of incongruity when demonstrators from both sides of LIFE issues physically fighting in D.C. to the point where police used tear gas to disperse them.] There are multiple opportunities in the course of one day where we can be faithful to our Catholic beliefs and enter into exchanges with people who hold different beliefs with grace, dignity and mutual respect. God's Kingdom is one of peace and reconciliation. We've work to do!

Join a group that supports and sustains housing equity in the city of Chicago. Try to learn exactly why another person holds the opposite position on female health issues. Spend time in daily prayer to give thanks that we can compassionately and religiously respect Mother Earth by learning the science of global warning that is destroying our beautiful world. Attempt to listen more closely to a relative's position on euthanasia or economics. Read up on current issues such as alternative sources of fuel, the benefits of natural medicinal remedies, the ins and outs of international economics. Deepen your love for the Eucharist from which all our spiritual strength flows and into which we pour all our works as disciples of Jesus. Read the conversion stories of Francis and Clare of Assisi and see how they may parallel your own journey. Override the darkness of depression by seeking the light within your heart and give that light to someone who also needs it. Share in a weekday Eucharist to experience the Lord's presence during your workday. Teach children how to conserve energy and recycle everyday items. Write and/or email members of Congress about the issues pertinent to our faith. Journal daily or occasionally to track your progress in life's challenges. Express your faith bravely in conversations with those of other faith traditions. Never, ever forget that God is always present to you, even when you think the opposite. If God were not present, God would not be the God we praise. Start your day with an uplifting verse from a psalm, like:

**In the morning let me know your love
for I put my trust in you.
Make me know the way I should walk:
to you I lift up my soul.**

Psalm 143



And now I must speak on behalf of Fr. Mike Fowler, pastor, Fr. Mario DiCicco, and all the friars of our community here at St. Peter's. Our Gala on July 14 was the most successful ever! We thank each of you who contributed so generously to our major fundraiser. It had been three years since we were able to be physically present with each other and the spirit in the Lincoln Ballroom at the Union League Club was beyond lively for three hours! Ticket sales, items for purchase and a really fun live auction, donations and hours of volunteers' hard work brought St. Peter's a much-needed financial boost. Even more invigorating was knowing the bond people share because of our Church community and ongoing presence in the Loop. We continue to remember you and all our benefactors every single day in our community prayer and devote ourselves to a future that will bring God's Kingdom into daily life here at 110 West Madison in the joyful spirit of Francis and Clare of Assisi. May God give you courage to do your part as a disciple of the Lord. May Christ give you courage and strength to live the Gospel values He's given us. And may the Spirit of the living God fill your heart and life with lasting peace and everything that is good.

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