

"I WILL RUN AND FAINT NOT..." (4 Agn 31)

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I have wished to entitle this moment of reflection on the contemplation of Clare and Francis thus, entering into the subject by means of a phrase Clare herself used, in order to highlight from the beginning an aspect that I would like to stand out with all it bears, namely the dynamism of their interior life. And this is true also for Clare, who lived her whole life of consecration at San Damiano, in the enclosure. But within it Clare ran and did not grow faint until she reached her goal, which is the "cellar of wine"; where she awaited the embrace of the Spouse, which in the *Fourth Letter to Agnes* she describes with very strong and very beautiful nuptial expressions, gleaned from the *Song of Songs* (cf ?· 4, 6): "[] until your left hand be under my head and your right hand happily embrace me, and you kiss me with the most joyful kiss of your mouth" (4 Agn 32). This, therefore, is the goal: union, as in every worthy contemplative life.

At the end of their lives, Clare and Francis faced death with a fully reconciled interior attitude. "Go forth securely and in peace[...]" (*Proc III, 20*): so spoke Clare to her soul, inviting it to run the last stretch of the road. And Francis: "Welcome, my sister Death!" (*AssC 100*), establishing even with death that rapport of familiarity and confidence that he had with every creature. "The final enemy to be destroyed will be death" (*1 Cor 15:28*): contemplation, true contemplation, on the one hand, makes life beautiful, renders it lovable, because it teaches us to look at it with the very eyes of God; on the other hand – and as a natural consequence – it conquers the fear of death, to the point of rendering even death lovable. Or better, contemplation puts us into such a profound and authentic rapport with our Triune God, that in Him it is possible to find again the orientation and the meaning of life in all its aspects, grasping that surely more problematic thing which is death. In reality, with this interior attitude Clare set out for Heaven: in her heart were united gratitude for life – "May You be blessed, Lord, for having created me [...]" (*Proc III, 20*) – and the desire to attain what she had always sought, what had given life itself fullness and meaning. It was thus for Francis, in that phrase he spoke to the friars before his transitus: "Having done what was mine to do, I depart tranquilly..." I would say that this serenity in the face of death could be almost a measure for verifying the authenticity, the depth of a contemplative life.

Having started out from the point of arrival of Clare and Francis, now we seek to express, insofar as possible, how concretely supple was their interior course. I underline the "insofar as possible", because Clare and Francis, unlike other saints, have left us little autobiographical information regarding their interior life; what we know has been drawn from the testimonies about them and from their writings where, however, they do not speak explicitly of themselves in this most intimate aspect. And this discretion, this modesty, is a very beautiful trait which I am pleased to bring out. "Blessed is the servant who guards in his heart the secrets of the Lord" (*Adm XXVIII, 3*): in this, too, Clare shows herself to be a faithful disciple of Francis!

The point of departure: the most high poverty

Looking now at Clare's "course", I would like to underline her point of departure, that then gave the rhythm to the whole course that followed – as, in fact, happens in every course: "how one sets out" is fundamental! And I want to underline this because it tells us something important also about the soul of Francis. Clare herself recounts for us how she set out, both in the *Forma Vitae* and in the *Testament*. She recalls her own beginnings and that of the first sisters, when they

were still at San Angelo di Panzo, before the transfer to San Damiano:

“Then Francis, observing attentively that, although we were weak and frail in body, we did not refuse any deprivation, poverty, labor, trial or ignominy and scorn of the world, but rather we regarded them as great delights, following the example of the saints and of his own brothers; and having seen it frequently for himself, he greatly rejoiced in the Lord” (*TestCl* 27-28; cf *RCI* VI,2).

This has always struck me: what made Francis rejoice when he looked at the life of the first sisters? And rejoice to such a degree as to give them a *Forma Vivendi* (cf. *ibid* 2-4), therefore with a joy that had very concrete and important consequences... He does not rejoice to see them praying with devotion, or being in accord, or working willingly, even though all of this also would have been true. He rejoices to see them strong under the cross, firm in tribulation; even more, in seeing them absolutely content in the thick of the mystery of most high poverty. In the face of this, Francis said, “These have understood, they really are women who pray, women who have encountered the Lord”, yet he said this not in these, my poor words, but with that most beautiful trinitarian formula that so clearly recalls the marian *Antiphon* in the *Office of the Passion*:

“Since by divine inspiration you have made yourselves daughters and handmaids of the most high King, the heavenly Father, and espoused yourselves to the Holy Spirit, choosing to live according to the perfection of the holy Gospel [...]” (*RCI* VI, 3).

From how they lived the troubles of life in all its aspects, Francis understood that they were in a close relationship with God, with the Three Divine Persons, in the way Mary was. In consequence of this he pledged himself to take them under his protection and that of his brothers: indeed, he saw them living thus “after the example of the saints and of his own brothers” (*TestCl* 28), so he recognized them as moved by the same Spirit. I say this only incidentally: perhaps the much-discussed question of complementarity could be re-read starting from here, from this communion in a way that is the way of continual penitence, that is, of continual conversion; and also the modality for living it should be sought starting from here.

Therefore, the precariousness and the difficulties of life are the door that gives access to the mystery of God, which then is nothing other than the dynamic of the paschal mystery: in order to arrive at the fullness of Easter morning, and thus to the vision of the living Jesus, it is necessary to traverse the anguish of Thursday, the loss of Friday, the silence of Saturday... And this, in the concreteness of a day to day life made up of events that challenge our faith. Personally, I believe that a life of following in the footsteps of Francis and Clare rests upon this basic assumption, that the most high poverty, spelled out in all its aspects, is the lens through which we contemplate the mystery of God.

And this has very concrete consequences in our contemplative life, according to the clear will and tenacious defense of Clare. The distance from the traditional monastic world that Clare took by her request for the *Privilege of Poverty*, that is, by asking the Pope that no one would be able to constrain them to receive possessions, establishes our contemplative style of life: Clare did not choose the path of *amerimni`a*, of the absence of material preoccupations, which could have been guaranteed by the possession of immobile goods (such as lands) and therefore by the security of fixed revenues. Gregory IX proposed this and found himself before the finely chiseled

response of Clare: "Holy Father, for no reason would I ever desire to be absolved from the following of Christ" (*LegCl 14*). It was an attitude in which she showed herself to be a faithful disciple of Francis, yet in a different modality, so as to express concretely most high poverty: Francis, in an itinerant form of life, prohibited accepting money, either directly or through an intermediary person (cf. *Rb IV,1*); Clare, in a contemplative and enclosed form of life, prohibited accepting property in the form of lands (cf. *RCl VIII, 10-15*). Indeed, we ought to say that Clare followed Francis via an even more daring path. She led a community of 50 sisters, with all that was involved in running the house, always protecting the times of prayer and finding the time to work for a living as well, while always observing a strict enclosure which imposed that others would go for the alms (cf. *RCl VIII, 2*, where she substitutes the "let them go with trust for alms" of *Rb VI,2*, with "let them send trustingly for alms"): this is no small daring... It is here that one understands the meaning of the *Privilege of Poverty*, which was paradoxical and a source of preoccupation for the Pope precisely because it was requested by an enclosed community: "We will manage as best we can, with fidelity and commitment; as for the rest, we are certain that the Heavenly Father will provide without the need for us to reach out for security in material things: day after day the Father will provide". I find it significant that in the *Privilege of Poverty* the same image returns that we have seen in the *Fourth Letter to St. Agnes* regarding the final goal of the itinerary of Clare's life:

"In such a proposal you do not fear the lack of goods: because the left hand of the Heavenly Spouse is under your head to sustain the weakness of your body, which through an ordered charity you have placed under the law of the spirit. Surely He Who feeds the birds of the heavens and clothes the lilies of the field will not fail you in food or clothing, until in eternal life He will pass before you and Himself minister to you, namely when His right hand will embrace you most happily, in the fullness of His vision" (*Priv 4-6*).

We know that the text of the *Privilege* probably repeats the *petitio* of Clare, therefore proving clearly that for her the door of contemplation is most high poverty, yet even more radical because it is associated with reclusion.

To me this seems very important as an approach to understanding the interior life of Clare and Francis, and therefore for understanding our specific way of union with God. To put it very simply: one does not pray well in the moments in which one does not have preoccupations, thoughts, emotions... you pray well when you succeed in contemplating the face of Jesus in the midst of all this, encountering it or at least His expression there, because there He will make Himself present. Prayer becomes the place where we work out the difficulties of life and learn to manage them, it is the place of faith, of hope, as well as of love (let us think of so many troubled relationships that encumber the heart and mind...). A very simple but very effective example: at Bethlehem, when Jesus was to be born, the Eternal Word was to appear among men: in that most solemn of moments for the life of humanity, St. Joseph suffered tribulation in seeking a place for Him to be born, and Mary underwent all the discomforts of an imminent childbirth; it was thus that they prepared themselves to clasp in their arms, in that intimate and profound way granted to them alone, the Son of God made man.

In this regard, I remember that in Francis' biographies poverty is seen as his spouse, using mystical expressions of this kind:

"[...]he desired to espouse her with an eternal love. [...] enamored of her beauty, in order to adhere to his spouse and to be two in one single spirit, he not only left father and mother, but detached himself from everything. From then on he clasped her in chaste embraces and not even for an instant would he agree not to be her spouse" (2Cel 55).

This tells us a great deal about the "mysticism" of Francis which, as with every true "mysticism", turns out to be extremely concrete: for him poverty was a spouse, therefore, something that touched him in his flesh. And this, because he had chosen Jesus, Who, from being rich, made Himself poor for our sake (cf. 2Cor 8,9): Francis was enamored of poverty as a natural consequence, spontaneous and inescapable, of his love for Jesus. And he understood that in order to find Jesus and to live in intimacy with Him, the only way is that of poverty.

And furthermore, I see in this an honest way of sharing in the lot of our brothers and sisters in the world, an aspect also dear to Franciscan spirituality. I can bring in here my own experience: in general, those who come to our gate arrive laden with the burdens of life, heavy with the weight of various kinds of poverty: material, moral or spiritual. It would not be honest to encourage our brethren to find the Lord within this reality of the cross, to teach them that prayer sinks its roots there, in the daily difficulties, and then to seek for ourselves other paths, ways of relief, of evasion. That is not what Francis and Clare did, because that is not what Jesus did. I have understood this from hearing a verb, used frequently in our communities, which always leaves me very perplexed: the verb "to be detached" in the sense of "being disengaged" in some way from a situation... I look at Jesus on the cross and think: "Thank goodness that You are not yet detached!" Then I think also of so many poor people in the world, who have no choice, who cannot be "detached", not even if they wanted to be; or of so many daily situations of difficulty, that of families tested by sufferings due to health, or moral sufferings... And I come to the conclusion that this desire of "being detached" may be a betrayal of our profession.

The grace of working

So then the way of poverty as a way of contemplation. From this we see the importance of work in Franciscan-Clarian spirituality.

"Those brothers to whom the Lord has given the grace of working, should work with fidelity and devotion, so that banishing idleness, the enemy of the soul, they do not extinguish the spirit of holy prayer and devotion, which all other temporal things should serve" (Rb V, 1-2).

Thus Francis phrases what Clare takes up again in her *Regula* (cf. RCl VII, 1-2). Therefore, work is a grace, and insofar as it is such, in as much as it is a gift of God, it is to be welcomed from His hands and carried out *fideliter et devote* (*faithfully and devotedly*): work contains the dynamic of prayer, because it is welcomed from the hands of God, Who gives us the possibility of doing it, and to Him it is to be returned *fideliter et devote*. The root of *fideliter* is *fides*, "faith"; *devote* has that of *voveo*, "to vow". I think that it may be a common and shared experience in "fatigue" (precisely *labor*...) in carrying forward certain works: the only way to achieve the end happily is to receive them from the hands of God, in the consciousness of an obedience that one is rendering to Him, for His glory and the salvation of souls, and also to direct them to Him, without seeking personal affirmation or gratification or recognition. It is this dialogue with Him that makes work

a place of encounter, and therefore of contemplation, of union.

In this mode we can read the recommendation of Francis in his *Regula non Bullata*:

"[...] in the holy charity, that is God, I pray all the friars, whether ministers or others, that banishing every impediment and putting aside all preoccupation and anxiety of whatever sort as best they can, they dedicate themselves to serving, loving, honoring, and adoring the Lord God with a clean heart and pure mind, which He requires above all things. And always to construct within ourselves a permanent habitation and dwelling for Him, Who is the omnipotent Lord God, Father and Son and Holy Spirit [...]" (*Rnh XXII, 26-27*).

Francis did not say to banish impediments and weariness in all of this, that is, to seek a tranquil life, but to banish them from our mind, that is, not to permit them to disturb our thoughts, so they may always be directed to the Lord; this means there *are* worries and troubles, there have to be, and there always will be, but they are to be cast upon the Lord. Precisely with this word Francis sent forth the friars into the world: "Cast your cares upon the Lord, and He will sustain you" (*LegM III,7*). Therefore, troubles will be; the important thing is to know what to do with them, where to put them...

I think that this should make us reflect on our way of understanding contemplation! But that is not to say we should not dedicate to the Lord times and moments of silence, of retreat, of listening. We know well Francis' habit of withdrawing to live Lent in solitude; of Clare who was already living a life of reclusion oriented to the search for full communion with God; we know from the *Process* that "in the evening after Compline she would remain long at prayer with abundant tears [...]" (*Proc X,3*). The important thing is that such moments not be intervals of escape, where I distance myself from the complexities of life which, in spite of myself, I will have to face again sooner or later, with even greater difficulty; they must be spaces of listening in which I put my interior world under the gaze of God and learn to look at it with His eyes and to read it in the light of His Word. Unfortunately, in religious life one frequently hears the phenomenon of *burn out* spoken of, which is nothing other than "exhaustion". In my view, this does not depend so much on the work charge – you never hear about lazy-bone saints... – but on the way in which one lives the work charge, out of a dynamic steeped in super-work: if it is a self-centered dynamic, taut from seeking oneself, it will easily bring me to an implosion; if instead I seek the Lord, it will be an open dynamic, capable of making me grow in my relationship with Him, fruitful for good. It is the search for God and His glory that gives unity to the multiplicity of obligations and prevents interior disintegration. Therefore, the way to resolve these moments of fatigue can also be by a withdrawal from duties – at times this is undoubtedly necessary – but on the condition that this would be for an interior re-motivation, in order to ask ourselves what we are truly seeking and to recenter ourselves in God; but the absence of duties, period, could create an unexpected void that is hard to deal with, and therefore harmful.

The night of faith

The route of Francis and Clare on the way of contemplation is so supple that it is precisely an extremely concrete and day-to-day course, that goes by the way of the cross, the cross that foresees even the most fearful aspect, that of spiritual darkness, of abandonment by the Father. In fact the common experience called "the night of faith" has not been described by Francis and Clare, but it is impossible that they did not traverse it: if Francis at La Verna was fully conformed to Jesus crucified, then he also lived the interior drama of separation from the Father, the absence

of God. And if Clare was *altera Maria*, then she must have had the sword that pierced her soul.

I think I have found two possible explanations for this, the first of which was suggested to me by the contemplation of the Crucifix which was the pivot of their life, and that is now universally known as the crucifix "of San Damiano": Francis' adventure of faith began with it, and then Clare was called to safeguard it, maintaining alive during the course of the days the memory of the mandate entrusted to Francis. And the Crucified of San Damiano is alive, erect, one Who looks beyond, with eyes full of hope. Therefore in the contemplative journey of Francis and Clare the message of the cross surely has an important weight, as we have said, but it is the message of "this" cross, a glorious cross. In all the difficulties required of them there is, nevertheless, this horizon of glory, of light, of life: the pascal mystery was lived in its entirety, even to the ascension into Heaven... the horizon is that of the things above.

Before she died, Clare said to one of her sisters: "Do you see the King of glory as I do?" (*Proc IV, 19*): the glorious Lord comes to meet her, and she recognizes Him, because she had contemplated Him for an entire lifetime. In parallel, Francis at La Verna sees "a man in the form of a Seraph, with six wings, hovering over him, with his hands stretched out and the feet joined, fixed to a cross" (*1Cel 94*). And the reaction this vision provokes in him is singular:

"He was also overwhelmed by a vivid joy and superabundant gladness because of the most lovely and sweet gaze with which the Seraph regarded him, of unimaginable beauty; but he was at the same time struck with awe in seeing Him fixed to the cross in the most bitter pain of the passion. There arose, so to speak, sorrow and joy, since gladness and bitterness alternated in his spirit" (*ibid.*).

This is, therefore, a single mystery of cross and of glory, of sorrow and of joy, so that it is true that from the gift of the stigmata, from full conformity to Jesus crucified, there sprang the *Praises of God Most High*... This is Christian contemplation: concreteness in following, even to the supreme gift of oneself – for Francis it resulted in that unequivocal confirmation of authenticity which is the stigmata, and for Clare in the 28 years of infirmity that were lived, however, in joy, gratitude and praise. And this, because the gaze of the Crucified always propelled them "beyond", with right faith that does not, that is, admit deviations; with sure hope, without hesitations; with perfect charity, without the shadows of self-seeking; in faith, hope and charity they never "lost" the Lord. And even the spiritual poverty of interior darkness was lived as a blessing: it is joy even to despoil oneself of the search for spiritual gratification, because it is a choice of liberty, of detachment from confirmations, returns, compensations – even spiritual ones – that are always riches too! It is enough for everyone to remember the Fioretti of "perfect joy"... (*cf. Fior VIII*).

And not only this. Typical of Franciscan spirituality is the contemplation of creation, or better, the contemplation of the reflection of God present in all His creatures, animate and inanimate: a useful example is the *Canticle of the Creatures*, even aside from the fact that it was composed in a time of great physical exhaustion for Francis, almost as if his capacity for contemplation was augmented in proportion to his trials – and this, too, can make us reflect on what we understand by contemplation... We know from a testimony at the process of canonization that when Clare, on her part,

“sent the serving sisters outside the monastery, she admonished them that, whenever they would see beautiful trees, with flowers and foliage, they should praise God; and likewise whenever they would see people and other creatures they should, for all things and in all things, always praise God” (*Proc XIV*).

I am struck by this recommendation of Clare, when it is set alongside that of the Rule (*IX, 12-19*): here we see a Clare who is attentive to safeguard the interior life and good name of the monastery and the sisters by recommendations in the negative: they are not to remain long outside, they are not to have suspect meetings, they are not to carry back inside gossip from the outside, and vice-versa... All this is clearly directed to safeguarding a contemplative spirit. And precisely because of this she adds: “Praise God for everything that you see!” Clare does not mean to hand on to the sisters only some “no’s”, but a great “yes” to God and to His creative wisdom; not to say only: “Don’t be looking around you”, but “For everything you see, give praise!” This is so beautiful and so Franciscan, and it tells us how even the sisters *servientes extra monasterium* (*who serve outside the monastery*) should safeguard their contemplative spirit.

For Francis and Clare, all of creation “signified” God (*CantCr 5*): the face of God shone in every being, so for them a “night of faith” was impossible. Even more, the face of God was mysteriously impressed with particular intensity in the poor, the marginalized, the rejected, as was clearly demonstrated by Francis’ famous kiss of the leper; for Clare, it was the personal care she gave to the sisters who were infirm, tempted or despairing (*cf. LegCl 12; 38*). It was not by accident that Bonaventure, in the *Legenda Major* brought together the episode of the kissing of the leper with a vision of Jesus fixed to the cross which Francis had immediately afterwards (*cf. LegM 1,5*). And here we comprehend with still greater clarity why Clare and Francis never “lost” the Lord: because they found Him there, where usually we are accustomed to withdraw and turn our backs. Let us think of our own personal leprosy, but first of the leprosy that dwells within us, which is surely the hardest of all to accept... Thus when Clare in her *Second Letter* exhorts Agnes:

“[...] embrace, poor virgin, the poor Christ. See how He was made for your sake despised, and follow Him, yourself made despised in this world for His sake. Gaze, O most noble queen, on your Spouse, the most beautiful of the sons of men, become for your salvation the vilest of men, scorned, smitten and scourged many times all over His body, dying amid the agonies of the cross: look at Him, consider Him, contemplate Him, desiring to imitate Him” (*2Agn 18-20*),

she is saying the same thing that Francis said about his kiss of the leper, in his ever pliant way of speaking. In what we normally avoid there is a secret beauty, that is to be fully discovered, or better, to be fully believed, a beauty that the Son of God has taken up and made His own.

If we think of the devotion, whether of Francis or of Clare, for the two mysteries of the Incarnation and the Passion of the Lord, we understand that what enamored them was the poor and fragile humanity of Jesus, which manifested itself greatly in all its truth at Bethlehem and on Calvary, which they saw reflected most distinctly in the fragility and poverty of their brethren: from this came their love for the poor, the little ones, the least... the problem is first of all theological-spiritual, rather than sociological.

At the beginning I spoke of Francis and Clare's interior course. Indeed, they really lost no time, in the sense that they used well the time given them. Anyone with experience knows that in order to run well, you need to be light.

"Remember your proposal, like a second Rachel always looking to your beginning; what you have obtained, hold fast, what you are doing, do and never cease, but with swift pace, light step and un stumbling feet, so that your footsteps raise no dust, go forward securely, gladly and eagerly, advancing with care along the narrow path of blessedness, believing no one, agreeing with no one who would draw you back from this proposal, who would put an obstacle in your way to impede you from rendering your vows to the Most High with that perfection to which the Spirit of the Lord has called you" (2Agn 11-14).

In this way Clare exhorted St. Agnes of Prague, and the context is the choice of radical poverty made by Agnes after the example of Clare. "This is that perfection for which the King Himself will unite you to Himself in the eternal bridal chamber, where He sits gloriously on a throne of stars" (*ibid*, 5), thus expressing Agnes' espousals with a saying from the Gospel which Clare and Francis gave to aspirants (*cf. Rb II,5; RCI II, 8*): "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess, and give it to the poor.." (*Mt 19,21*). As I said, it is important how one sets out, it is important from the first beats in the rhythm of a lifelong journey to define exactly our basic intention: for we are consecrated first of all to finding the Lord and living of Him and for Him, and unless we set out and walk like this, I think it will be difficult to find Him!

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