

The Basilica of St. Clare

friar Bob Hutmacher, ofm

The Church celebrates the Solemnity of St. Clare of Assisi on August 11. If you've read my past articles you know how much I love Clare as healer and example of faith. In May I began a Legion series about important structures in Assisi that hold our heritage in unique ways. So I present to you the simple yet elegant Basilica of Clare in honor of her feast this month.

Marino Bigaroni, o.f.m. is a recognized scholar of Franciscan history and virtually any building within the city walls of Assisi. I lived with Marino at Chiesa Nuova in the '90's and he was a true brother, mentor and incredible resource for my growing knowledge and research about medieval life. When I last visited with him he was in the infirmary at the Porziuncola; even though 95 at the time, he was still doing research, still writing articles!

Marino collaborated on a masterwork, *La Basilica di Santa Chiara in Assisi*, published in 1994. The authors' 300 page tome covers every aspect of the history, architecture and art works of the Basilica through photography and text.



Basilica of St. Clare and the Protomonastery

Clare died on August 11, 1253. Pope Alexander IV wanted to canonize her immediately after her funeral but Vatican personnel and ecclesial procedures stopped him from doing so. After she died, Clare's body was taken from San Damiano to the Chapel of San Giorgio up in Assisi. She was canonized in 1255 (Francis was also canonized just two years after his death) and construction of her basilica began in 1257.

The Poor Clares were given ownership of the Chapel of San Giorgio (and land) by the Diocese of Assisi. According to Bigaroni's research the architect was Fra Giovanni da Penna, a friar from nearby Foligno who was also the architect of the Basilica of St. Francis. The cruciform structure was chosen so as to incorporate the Chapel of San Giorgio at the right side of the transept. This chapel is where the original San Damiano Crucifix hangs to this day; it was also the place where Francis was educated in his early life because it also housed a school and a small hospital.

If you look at the view of the Basilica from above you see the tallest bell campanile in Assisi where bells peal all day long. On the left side of the Basilica there are three enormous buttresses that support the north wall of the church; there is a large fountain under them, remnants of an ancient washhouse that was recorded present in 1283 and removed in 1872. There are three matching buttresses on the other side of the structure but they are incorporated into the protomonastery and not visible. By the way, *protomonastery* means the first or main dwelling place of a religious Order. A large, vibrant community of Poor Clares lives there today.

The interior of Clare's Basilica is as simple as the exterior. Frescoes of her life covered the walls of the nave but in 1568 Bishop Marco Palmerini had them covered with plaster. The 1832 earthquake destroyed most of the original



works under plaster so they are lost forever. The only ones left are in the vaulting above the main altar and a few remnants on the walls. Above the main altar hangs a magnificent 1260 crucifix portraying Christ with Mary and St. John at either hand. Francis embraces his crucified feet and Clare adores in humility. It's a marvelous statement of the centrality of the Cross in Franciscan spirituality.



Madonna 1265



Dossal of Clare 1283

The two works above are attributed to the *Master of St. Clare*, recently discovered to be Benvenuto Benveni of Foligno. The icon of Clare includes eight scenes from her life. These large icons are true treasures, both of which augment the femininity of the entire Basilica. On the left side of the transept is a small 14th century chapel dedicated to Saint Agnes of Assisi, Clare's blood sister and first to follow her into religious life. It contains the body of Agnes along with wonderful frescoes and art glass of significant saints.

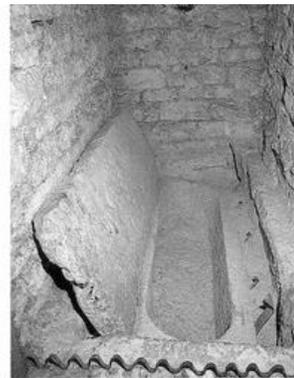
The stained glass windows in the nave are brilliant. They present various events in Clare's life and, to all appearances, look medieval; however, they were installed between 1897 and 1925 by Francesco Moretti. In October we will explore the Basilica of Francis and those windows are from the 13th century. I worked with friar Gerhard Ruf, ofm.conv in the '90's and he told me that the friars at that Basilica have the recipe for the original medieval glass!

The earthquakes of 1997 severely damaged both the Basilica and the protomonastery, requiring that all the nuns move to other monasteries throughout Europe until everything was restored. But the nuns insisted that a small house be built in their yard because there had been sisters with the body of Clare since the day she died in 1253 and they refused to completely abandon their Mother. A few nuns stayed there to be near her tomb until restoration was complete. A corner of the façade was damaged so badly that scaffolding extended across the length of the plaza to support it. In one

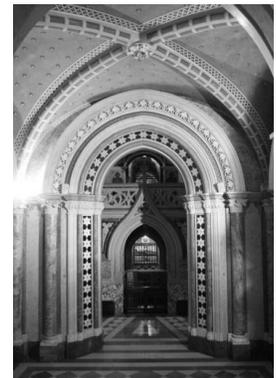
of my last visits with Marino before he moved to the friars' infirmary, he showed me a discovery in the monastery they found during restoration. What you see to the right here is the wooden coffin in which Francis of Assisi was originally buried. It was hidden for ages behind a wall that was broken open during the '97 earthquake. What a discovery!



The body of St. Clare was transferred from the Chapel of San Giorgio to a tomb under the main altar of the new church. This was done the night before the Feast of Francis on October 3, 1260. That sarcophagus was incorporated into a major renovation of Clare's tomb from 1851-1872. When her body was unearthed in 1851 it was found to be intact. The 1932 neo-Gothic reconstruction now leads directly to the body of Clare that is within a glass coffin in an enclosed room. In the late 1990's her remains were completely covered under a wax figure. There is always a Poor Clare at her tomb in prayer. Always.



1260 Sarcophagus



1851 Entrance to Clare's Tomb



The Body of St. Clare of Assisi

When you descend to the lower level of the Basilica to pray at Clare's tomb, you see a large room with precious relics of both Clare and Francis in it. After the destruction of the 1997 earthquakes it was redesigned and moved from the Chapel of San Giorgio. Habits, sandals, gowns and other items are on permanent display, along with historical information to help pilgrims learn more about this holy woman.



Last month I told you how, when I lived at Chiesa Nuova, I would accompany little Amadeo each day to Clare's Basilica. We would pray at her tomb, then he would take his place in his confessional and I would head to the libraries to find the day's medieval treasures. These visits were cathartic in my ongoing conversion and the reason I began to appreciate Clare so much. She has remained an anchor in my life, a true source of inspiration and intercessor for healing. She was a bed-ridden invalid the last 28 years of her life yet was renowned for bringing healing to any and all who sought her assistance. Many, many times I've referred people to Clare as a channel for God's healing power.

I've learned that healing more often than not means God helps us live with difficulties and maladies, that God not simply removes them or fixes us. The Cross implies that we willingly accept what life presents us and continue on in faith, like Christ, regardless of the pain or sacrifice. This is why, for a number of years now, we celebrate the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick in connection with Clare's Feast. This wonderful woman of faith continues her ministry of healing through the tender presence of Christ among us.

Fr. Kurt has asked Friar Gilberto Cavazos and me to present lectures this year in her honor. He teaches at our University of St. Anthony in Rome and is well known for his work with Clare. My lectures will highlight some of the medieval manuscripts of music and hymn texts about Clare I've worked with in libraries of Assisi. Please try to join us for these events all week long. We Franciscans rejoice on the Solemnity of St. Clare and revel in what she continues to be for the worldwide Franciscan family: a woman of strong faith who simply lived what God asked of her in

the footsteps of Francis. Her relationship with Francis was very different and holy. Yet she was her own woman who stood up to five different popes because she knew what God wanted her to do and not blindly follow dictates of men. Clare of Assisi is the first woman in history to write a rule for female religious. She chose to live a cloistered life yet had a far-reaching ministerial presence in the Church to "rebuild the Church for it is falling into ruin" through prayer and healing.

Celebrate St. Clare with us. Bring friends and coworkers to the lecture series. And certainly participate fully in our sacramental events during our Franciscan Week. May God fill your lives with patience, understanding and a willingness to carry your cross each day. May you have the courage to follow a woman such as Clare, a man such as Francis. May our creative God, Reconciler of the Universe, fill you with peace and everything that is good.

Friar Bob Hutmacher, ofm

Franciscan Week ~ August 7 – 11, 2017

Monday, Aug. 7, 12:10 p.m. Gilberto Cavazos, ofm
The Life and Times of Clare of Assisi
 An explanation of Clare's life and context based on the oldest image of her with an invitation to consider your own holiness.

Tuesday, Aug. 8, 12:10 p.m. Robert Hutmacher, ofm
A Musical Portrait of Lady Clare
 Hymn texts written about Clare immediately after her death reveal how her contemporaries honored her. See and sing 13th century music!

Wednesday, Aug. 9, 1:15 p.m.
Anointing of the Sick during Eucharist in honor of St. Clare, the healer.

Thursday, Aug. 10, 12:10 p.m. Robert Hutmacher
A Musical Portrait of Lady Clare II
 Explore even more astounding poetic images from 13th century manuscripts Friar Bob researched in Assisi. Sing, pray and learn through medieval artistry.

Friday, Aug. 11 ~ Solemnity of St. Clare of Assisi
11:40 p.m. Solemn Eucharist of St. Clare
5:40 p.m. Solemn Evening Prayer of St. Clare