

THIS IS LENT

Friar Bob Hutmacher, ofm

One of our Franciscan treasures are the four letters that St. Clare of Assisi (1193-1253) wrote to St. Agnes of Prague (1211-1285). These missives overflow with dazzling medieval imagery, spiritual wisdom, and a magnificent record of the earliest days of the Franciscan movement among women. Agnes, daughter of Bohemian King Ottokar and Hungarian Queen Constance was a



royal pawn. At 8 she was engaged to Henry, King of Germany (he was 10). Well educated by both Cistercian and Norbertine nuns, Agnes was sent to the German court of Duke

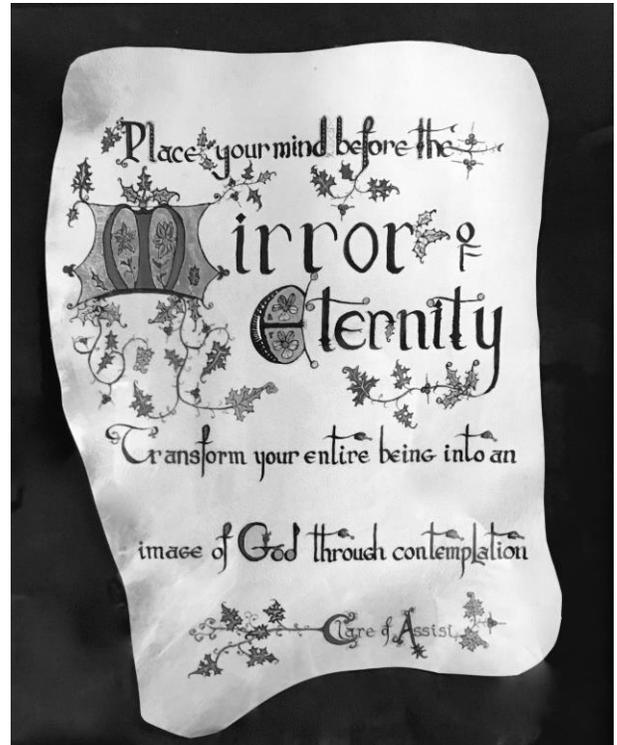
Leopold who wanted Henry to marry his daughter, Margaret. Agnes' father Ottokar declared war against Leopold when that original betrothal was cancelled. Ottokar then wanted Agnes to marry Henry III of England, but that was vetoed by Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II who wanted to marry Agnes himself. [A Hollywood screenwriter could not have scripted such royal twists and turns!]

Wisely, Agnes refused to be any part of a politically arranged marriage and decided to devote herself to a life of prayer and holiness. Since Agnes was a princess and had connections to the royal coffers because her brother, Wenceslaus I, ascended to the throne of Bohemia. She was able to found two Franciscan friaries and the Hospital of St. Francis in 1233. Five Poor Clares from Assisi came to Prague to help establish a community there. Agnes herself joined the Clares in 1236. Following in the footsteps of Francis himself, she cared for lepers and the destitute of Prague. Most important in our history is the fact that this community was the first Poor Clare monastery established north of the Alps. I was in Prague a few years ago and Agnes of Bohemia is memorialized on the face of the 50 Crown note of Czech currency.

Before I go any further, I pose a question: don't you find it amazing that people were able to communicate so well across Europe in the 13th century? Religious were particularly aware of one another; Francis was familiar with the writings of

Bernard of Clairvaux and other masters. Couriers carried messages, letters and goods across continents. Both Clare and Agnes were familiar with the ways of the world because they came from nobility and royalty respectively. The fact that we have four complete letters that made it from central Umbria to a city on the same latitude as Paris and north of Vienna is remarkable. Enough background. Let's look at some content that I believe can assist us during Lent.

An injunction from Clare's third letter to



Agnes of 1236 is on this 12" x 18" illumination I created a few years ago. It's done in medieval gouache, 23K gold leaf and on genuine sheepskin parchment I brought back from Assisi. The full section of this letter reads: ***Place your mind before the Mirror of Eternity. Place your soul in the brilliance of glory. Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance. And transform your entire being into an image of God through contemplation.*** Let's take this splendid quote into our Lenten pilgrimage of transformation.

MIRROR. Gregory of Nyssa (334-394) made use of this image; he pointed out that good lives reflect divine beauty. St. Augustine used the image in *Ennaratio I psalmum* in which he wrote that the Bible is a 'mirror of knowledge.' He used it in a rule for religious women also. The medieval theologian, Hugh of St. Victor (1096-

1141), built much of his works on those of Augustine. In his commentary on the Rule of St. Augustine, Hugh wrote that his book is like a mirror “for in it we can see, as in a mirror, in what state we are, whether beautiful or deformed, just or unjust.” 13th century religious literature is filled with this image and both Clare and Agnes would have been exposed to it because they were educated and, though both cloistered, were very aware of theology, developments in the evangelical life for women and the particularities that Francis of Assisi gave all three branches of the movement.

Contemplation. Numerous accounts of Francis himself going into caves and forests for weeks, even months at a time, fill his hagiography. This style of prayer, of being with God was a force, a spiritual magnet that attracted him from his initial conversion around 1205. Bonaventure’s *Major Life of St. Francis* retells the story of when Francis asked Br. Sylvester and Clare herself to pray for him. “Ask God whether I should devote my life to contemplation or to active preaching.” Both spent time in prayer and both offered him the same advice: hit the road and preach penance and peace! He did and our fraternity has done just that ever since. But he never let go of that hunger and desire to be alone with God in contemplative prayer. He demanded the same of his followers.

Clare also cherished this style of prayer in her daily routine. One misconception about cloistered nuns is that they are completely cut off from life and reality. “For Clare, religious life...is the fulfillment of the life of a man or a woman. Seclusion for her is really openness to the world; isolation is the fullness of spiritual communion. Within this paradoxical Gospel perspective, the little space of San Damiano contains the whole world; the tiny enclosure holds, within itself, infinite space.” [Marco Bartoli, *Clare of Assisi*]

The Poor Clares who have blessed my life are the most wonderful, prayerful women I know. And they know more about the contemporary world order, political scene, ecology and social justice than many people. A life devoted to prayer for the world demands knowledge of the world and people. Clare was renowned as a healer and people clamored to San Damiano to seek her assistance. The power of God flowed through her in many accounts of healing found in *The Process of Canonization*. She could not have done such

public acts of ministry if she were completely secluded and cut off from people.

There is, in our Franciscan way of life, a call for a healthy balance of active ministry and contemplative prayer. One of my favorite things as a friar is when some of us come early to morning prayer in our chapel. Just being quiet together with a few brothers is comforting. Communal quiet is very nourishing. It’s why the Roman Mass ritual calls for silence at specific moments, especially after Communion. Silent contemplation feeds us as we feed each other’s faith. That may sound altruistic, but it’s true.

This balance is seen so clearly in Gospel accounts of Jesus. How often did he go off to a secluded place to pray until the crowds found him and asked for healing hope? Christians saw and mirrored that balance of loving God by loving others as the hallmark of following Jesus. Imitation of Christ requires private prayer, and ability to see the need for social justice, a certain tenderness and affection and, finally, a community within which both contemplation and charity can be expressed. I look at all the parishes I’ve known over the years; there is always a group of people praying quietly before and after Mass and there are myriad ways of ‘being Church’ in our external modes of ministry.

Michael Blastic OFM Conv. wrote in his *Handbook of Spirituality for Ministers* and in *Franciscan Leadership in Ministry*: “The discipline of contemplation and compassion in the Franciscan tradition both demands and fosters attentiveness to what is happening in the world, in people’s lives as they unfold.” If you drop in for coffee or a meal with us friars you’ll automatically be drawn into conversations about contemporary happenings in the Church, the political arena, world events, the arts and even show business. And those of you who pray with us friars know the flavor of our public prayer. Ralph Kiefer was one of my favorite liturgy mentors at both Catholic Theological Union and at Notre Dame. He coined the phrase that Franciscan liturgy is “folksy high Church”. He meant that we know how to carry on with gorgeous ritual and music but we never lose sight of babies in the pews, dust on the statues and the human need for God. Incarnational is another apt word to describe us.

Back to the **mirror**. John of the Cross described the difference between meditation

and contemplation this way: "The difference between these two conditions of the soul is like the difference between working, and enjoyment of the fruit of our work; between receiving a gift, and profiting by it; between the toil of traveling and the rest of our journey's end". [The Ascent of Mt. Carmel] Contemplation leads to the discovery and realization that we are created in the image of God. The One we seek in prayer is already within us. We fall in love with Jesus and, as a result of that, with God our Creator. Brilliantly, Clare points Agnes (and us) to the Trinitarian relationship into which we are baptized. It is a dynamic one of sustained interpersonal love that never ends. Hence, in this mirror we see God AND we see ourselves. Drawing again from that third letter to Agnes: *Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance.* When we allow ourselves to be drawn into the life of God there follows a very real synthesis of our exterior and interior selves, the integration of spiritual and physical worlds.

When people ask me: 'how do I become holy?' I tell them to seek the woman or man God created you to be and allow her or him to rise to the surface. Are we not created in the image of God? Clare, Francis, John of the Cross and other towers of spiritual wisdom all wrote the same thing: the search for holiness is simply to see and make real the God within our hearts. That's the origin of the **mirror** image, why Clare would offer it to Agnes as she initiated the new Franciscan movement in Prague, why it can be such a helpful image for our own prayer.



The word **Lent** is derived from the Old English word *lencten*, which means *springtime*. Lent came into being in the 3rd and 4th centuries as a time for preparing catechumens for Easter Sacraments of Initiation. Gradually it was also a fast for returning Penitents, then for the entire community. In the RCIA Lent is referred to as the Period of Purification and Enlightenment during which "catechumens move from learning the deposit of our faith to genuine self-knowledge through serious

examination of their lives and true repentance." [RCIA #138] This dynamic of conversion is for all the members of the community, not just the Elect. We're all called to return to God.

I chose to write about contemplation this month as a suggestion for your own Lenten journey. Many resources are available to guide you in this form of prayer, but basically you already have the ability and the intended "target" within you. In his last work, *The New Man*, Thomas Merton wrote: "Contemplation goes beyond concepts and apprehends God not as a separate object but as the Reality within our reality, the Being within our being, the life of our life." (11, p. 19) Clare of Assisi said the same thing in a different way with a different image. Don't approach contemplation with high expectations of getting a halo by Easter. Holiness is a process. As a Lenten practice, simply BE with God in silence. Start by giving yourself just a few minutes, then increase the time you pray little by little. And be patient!

Our country, our world is in dire need of the Holy One who dwells among us. Millions of people hunger for the One who will draw us together, bring about peace, touch people with compassion. When we become aware of our God within, others will experience that Presence because of how we live. That is our gift to the world! That dynamic flow is what brings justice and the truth to God's *Little Ones*.

St. Peter's is a wonderful place for your **Lenten prayer**. We offer a Thursday lecture series this year at 12:10. On Fridays Scripture study is at 12:15 p.m. and Stations of the Cross at 4:15 p.m. Friar confessors are available six days a week and we celebrate the Eucharist seven times every weekday, five times on weekends. From 5:30 a.m. until 7:00 p.m. the perfectly quiet space of our church is yours for contemplation whenever Mass is not being celebrated. Confer the bulletin on line for more details. **Place your mind before the Mirror of Eternity. Transform your entire being into an image of God through contemplation.** Thank you for the many ways you support St. Peter's; we remember you in our daily prayers. May God lead you through Lent and give you peace and everything that is good.

Fr. Bob Hutmacher, ofm