



**CONFERENCE OF THE MINISTERS GENERAL
OF THE FRANCISCAN FIRST ORDERS AND THIRD ORDER REGULAR**

*LETTER FOR THE EIGHTH CENTENARY OF THE FOUNDATION OF THE
ORDER OF THE POOR SISTERS OF SAINT CLARE*

May the Lord give you all, Poor Sisters of Saint Clare, His peace!

The echo of the celebration of the foundation of the Franciscan First Order is still resounding as we now begin to focus on 2012 in order to give thanks to the Lord for the 800 years of the consecration of Clare in the Portiuncula. The anniversary is not a commemoration of a glorious past, but an event that we remember in order to “to take from its history a further impetus to renew the will to serve the Church.”¹

Called by the Spirit to follow the poor, crucified and risen Christ – and living the Gospel in obedience, without anything of your own and in chastity – you are custodians of the charism of St. Clare and consecrated women who interact with the world while contemplating the signs that the Spirit pours out in history. In listening to God you continue to speak today to the hearts of men and women of our time with the language of love, a language whose words are rooted in a reality where God dwells.

HOLD FIRM TO YOUR STARTING POINT

Remembering one’s own vocation is an occasion to revisit the motivations for your ‘yes’ to God. As you reread the story of your vocation, return to your encounter with the Lord that came to you through the Word, or a person, or an event, or an experience. After the initial difficulties you decided to follow Jesus Christ, leaving them to be resolved by Christ and his Gospel. The experience of Francis and Clare attracted you and today their ‘yes’ to Christ is extended in time through you. Aware that various vicissitudes have affected or conditioned the pristine character of your *Form of Life* and that various secular influences may at times have transformed your original intuition, we are convinced that the anniversary of your Order cannot limit itself to a simple reenactment.

What do we want to celebrate together is the memory of a rule or the memory of God’s story with you through time that still today gives you the passion “to observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, living in obedience, without anything properly your own and in chastity”² How can we bring to light that the *Form of Life* makes manifestly credible to all that “for us the Son of God made himself the Way and that our Blessed Father Francis, his true lover and imitator, has shown and taught us this by word and example?”³ How can you still today be a living reminder in the Church and for the entire Franciscan family of what all of us as baptized Christians are called to live?

¹ Benedict XVI, 23rd General Assembly of the International Federation of Catholic Universities (FIUC), November 19, 2009.

² RegCI I:2.

³ TestCI 5.

We know that you are expending your best efforts to be faithful to what you have chosen and promised and, for this reason, we feel the urgency to review with you at this historic moment the reference points of your life as Poor Clares placed by God in the Church, in the Franciscan family and in the world.

➤ ***Living the Gospel...***

In a society bombarded by images in which the individual is driven to seek a continuous representation of the self, you have been called by the Spirit to be a simple sign of the presence of God. We know that this is not always easy, above all when it requires a continuous Gospel conversion of mind, heart, behaviors, and even your own personalities in order to be meaningful and not to fall into facile secular competition, and without compromising the cardinal values of your life.

While the message that flows from your witness is expressed in structures, signs and symbols, the *Rule* written by Clare requires her daughters to live an evangelical life as poor women *sine glossa*. We know that the Spirit of God moves us within our communities to seek and discern through the Gospel in order to be alert to scrutinize structures that do not immediately reflect the presence of God. You are thus called to revisit the signs and symbols that exemplify your life so that they may be truly understandable in this time in which everything is regarded as a matter of opinion – a time in which even the sacred, which refers to nothing other than God, risks being judged by the consumer logic of use and thrown away.

Consecrated persons must express God as the absolute. In a special way, you are called to live a life founded on signs and symbols that do not refer to a sterile void of indoctrination, ritualism or activism, rather signs and symbols that are able to unite the roots of the past to the prophetic future in the present day: structures, signs and symbols that enable us to simply see God.

How can you be witnesses of God's presence through the *Form of Life* that the Spirit once entrusted to Clare, and continues to entrust to you, in this time in which even the most elementary reference points of existence seem to be lacking?

While the world turbulently turns, you, in your stability, manifest that God waits from all eternity to love the men and women of our time.

Nourishing yourselves on the Word of God, you en flesh it in your daily life through obedience in faith.⁴ Acquiring faith in Christ is not a once and for all event. It is a gift of the Spirit. It requires continuous learning and thus to be celebrated, professed and lived. Through the care of the liturgy you witness that God the Father, who is close to every creature, calls humanity to live in history in His presence. In your daily lives become visible seekers of the face of God in the manner of pilgrims in the world and of beggars of meaning.

If the liturgy shapes our faith, faith in turn must find verification in daily lives, both personal and communal, in order to be credible. In fact, it is not enough, to believe on the notional level. It is necessary that the Mystery celebrated assumes in each of us the face of Christ. Still today there is a widespread gap between faith and life.

Help us to reexamine our celebrations: the care of the Liturgy of the Hours and of the Eucharist, while constantly ordered to the praise of God, must allow each participant to experience the grace of the Risen Lord's presence through Clarian simplicity.

Abandoning yourselves through the Spirit and shaped by the Gospel, you are consecrated women who give yourselves to God. Based on the example of Francis and Clare, you, Poor Clares, like the Virgin contain Him in whom all things are contained.⁵ Bear witness in the silence of "contemplating the Christ of the Gospel, love him intensely and imitate His virtues."⁶

⁴ Cf. *The Service of Authority and Obedience* 7.

⁵ Cf. 3LAg 26.

⁶ Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, January 27, 2010.

Therefore, narrate with your lives that which you hear, which you see with your eyes, which you contemplate and which your hands touch, the Word of life.⁷ Continue to announce by your existence, living the mystical dimension of life, that God exists, that God is love.⁸

In this world that seems indifferent to God, you are called to refer back to the presence of the Mystery that has the face of the Father. Only by passionately searching for Christ and his Reign are you able to stand alongside the men and women of our time with hope in your hearts – aware that you are intimately connected with this wide community of humanity. Make us see the beauty of always feeling like people on a journey, daily staking their lives on God's presence in history.

The contemplative experience of Clare poses a question to us. If she invited Agnes to place her entire self in the image of Jesus Christ (cf. 3LAg 12-17), today she continues to ask you to allow yourselves to be transformed through contemplation, to give your very existence over to the unending pursuit of God, so as to free yourselves from anything that blocks God from being the center of your lives, and to love to the end.

If today God requires Christians to be adults in the faith, it is an even greater reason for you, consecrated women, to be asked to have an adult faith – one that knows how to express your personal experience of encountering the Lord in order to respond with hope wherever you are, to the profound questions of people our time. Only those who continuously walk under the gaze of God are able to truly listen to those seeking meaning.

Thank you for your tireless search for God: the freedom lived in God is an invitation to dive into the Mystery every day, to believe that God exists, because you have encountered him.

➤ **From poverty...**

In these days when few in the world live in abundance and many people do not have enough to feed themselves, to you, Poor Sisters of St. Clare, Francis continues to entrust his Last Testament:

“I, little brother Francis, wish to follow the life and poverty of our most high Lord Jesus Christ and his most holy Mother and to persevere in this until the end; and I ask you, my ladies, and I give you my advice that you live always in this most holy life and poverty. And keep careful watch that you never depart from this by reason of the teaching or advice of anyone.”⁹

You, Poor Sisters of St. Clare, are placed by God in a specific place to be a sign of contradiction, not because you defend any particular structures, but from poverty you choose to live the Gospel radically every day.

Every community becomes an alternative sign to the places of opulence and a sign of hope among those who live in precarious insecurity. Your witness is a surrendering of yourselves and entrusting yourselves to the Father who is revealed by Jesus Christ. This is not an ideological or intellectual poverty but a lifestyle that witnesses to a total trust in the Father and takes its form in daily life. There are, in fact, some communities that choose “to witness to an extremely spartan life in order to be in solidarity with the poor and to trust only in Providence, living every day in Providence, and to placing themselves with full trust into the hands of God.”¹⁰

Do not let anyone or anything to dissuade you of this conviction. Verify whether the diversity of thinking within your Order is founded upon a common quest to be faithful to Jesus Christ and the Gospel or whether it is a defense of certain lifestyles that no longer point to the Most High. God continues to call some to be prophets, not for self-exaltation, but to be signs of God's love and nearness to humanity. The Lord said, “I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry ... I know their sufferings.”¹¹

⁷ Cf. 1 Jn. 1:1.

⁸ Cf. 1 Jn 4:8.

⁹ RegCl 7-9.

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, January 13, 2010.

¹¹ Cf. Ex. 3:7.

Recount to us your faith in the Providence of God with a style of life that is poor, sober, and humble: “Poverty is the sign of belonging to Christ; it is the guarantee of the credibility of the Reign that is already in our midst. It is a sign ever more convincing today when it comes from a poverty lived in community with a style of life that is simple and essential, an expression of communion and abandoning of self to the will of God.”¹²

Make us taste the joy of freedom because contemplating, you see God in every fragment of life. Show us that you do not follow the fads of the day; that you are not swept up in worldliness, where appearance, self-exaltation, individualism, and self-referentialism appear to overshadow the masterpiece of God’s creation. Tell us about your experience with God which is nurtured on silence, listening and a profound spiritual life.

Living in stability, show us what is truly essential, beautiful and authentic. We know that God is the true wealth of the human heart¹³ and that poverty liberates us from the bondage to things and artificial needs which drive the consumer society: help us rediscover that Christ is the only treasure for which life is truly worth living.¹⁴ For Clare and Francis, “most holy poverty” is not just a virtue, not only a renunciation of things, but is above all, a name and a face: the face of Jesus Christ, poor and crucified (cf. 2LAg 19). For both of them, the contemplation of the poor Christ cannot be reduced to a beautiful mystical theory of detachment. Rather, it takes flesh in a real poverty that is concrete and essential.¹⁵ We look to their testimony: they both loved poverty in order to follow Christ with total dedication and freedom and still today, they continue to be an invitation to us to cultivate interior poverty in order to grow in trusting in God, and also uniting a sober lifestyle and detachment from material goods.¹⁶

You are called to follow the poor Christ by your *form of life* and thus to embrace poverty. If it is necessary, you must find new ways to express it¹⁷ with a prophetic spirit through a “clearer witness of personal and collective poverty”¹⁸ just as Francis and Clare did. The inculturation of some of the communities that conform themselves to the poor who live in their area is at times amazing. When you share with the poor who have nothing, when you choose to live with only what is of necessity, when you do not accumulate things needlessly, when you entrust yourself totally to the community, you make your choice of poverty credible because you are living your faith in God – the Father who cares for all of humanity.

➤ ***In holy unity...***

In the global village, the world today is in danger of becoming a stage on which everyone wanders, but in isolation. The crowd, in fact risks remaining entangled in a net of anonymity – individuals who lose their sense of belonging to a family, a group, or to a history and seem to move forward without a proper name, without knowing a familiar person.

Even though you are in a monastery you live in this society, where the “rootless” continue to increase in number, a society infused with a kind of incoherent or disjointed reality and where everything converges to organize a life that is disconnected and without meaning. Thus individuals often run around without an awareness of their own proper identity, impoverished in their communication with the “Other,” with whom they establish relationships that are nurtured by banality.

In your stability you reflect the presence of God in history that lends meaning to everyday life. You are an important sign in the Church, in the Franciscan Family, and in the world because in this

¹² Giacomo Bini, OFM, Minister General, in *L’Osservatore Romano*, February 1, 2003, p. 6.

¹³ Cf. *Vita consecrata* 90.

¹⁴ Cf. *Starting afresh from Christ* 22.

¹⁵ Cf. *Chiara d’Assisi e di oggi*, José Carballo, OFM, Minister General, pp. 15- 16.

¹⁶ Cf. Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, January 27, 2010.

¹⁷ Cfr. *Perfectae caritatis* 13.

¹⁸ IX Synod of Bishops, *The Consecrated Life and its Role in the Church and in the World: Instrumentum laboris* (June 26, 1994) 53.

time, in which everyone claims their own rights or lives an egocentric life, you continue to recount to us by your relationships that it is still possible to stake your life on love.

To a world that strives to reduce the individual to a consumer immersed in the “laws of the market” you rely on authentic relationships that are nourished by silence, listening, waiting, forgiveness, generosity, the gift of surrendering oneself in faith, respect for the diversity of roles, and in relationships that aim to nourish the other to grow in freedom according to the stature of Christ. Today, while the current mentality is directed toward the leveling of roles, you show us how to be “spouse, mother and sister.”¹⁹ In your communities unite firmness to gentleness, empathy to authority, responsibility to freedom, autonomy to trust.

In welcoming each sister as a person who is unique and unrepeatable, you make known to the world the masterpiece of God – creation – and that she is a part of the creation that you love so much. Love every person in his or her entirety; constituted by biological, psychological, and spiritual dimensions and led by the Spirit, a sister is not reducible to a single dimension.

In the face of widespread intolerance, disrespect, suspicion, and the desire to dominate in our world, you respond by placing yourselves next to the “Other” and together as community you work in the hearts of the people of our time through dialoguing with those who knock on the doors of your monasteries. Help us to be people who really listen, who promote relationships rooted in the Gospel, deeply human, and who aim to be open and welcoming. It is important for us to be able to always see in the ordinariness of life that you seek the greater happiness of the “Other.” Strive “to be for the other.”²⁰

From your contemplation derive new ways to be consecrated women, learn from the school of the Spirit how to combine constant attention to God and to the sisters. We perceive in you a continuous journey that frees you from every form of selfishness. Do not be preoccupied with trying to be the center of the universe. Live according to the economy of self-giving, according to the spirituality of communion without quantifying love or laying claim for a return from the other. Live the joy that derives from the experience of Christ’s gratuitous love for us.

We need to learn from the “laboratory” of your culture as Poor Clares, which is founded on the Gospel, to help us to develop a method that will enable us to combine ethical values with social values in order to radically live according to the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and of Jesus Christ... and to be bearers of the Gospel through a culture of justice and peace.

The care that you show to formation is noteworthy. You do not allow it to be merely intellectual instruction; rather you aspire to communicate a way of being. You enter into that which you learn with emotional understanding and you retain that which is meaningful for your existence and that of others. You witness in the ordinariness of daily life through a human development that is sustained by ongoing conversion that enables you to follow Jesus Christ as poor ladies.

You represent for many an oasis of peace where people may consider the Mystery that surrounds life and is experienced through it. You are called to give credibility to the desire for God in the depth of every creature and the constancy of God’s seeking out men and women to freely establish a relationship with them founded in love. We know how involved you are with the concerns of the world and how you continue to intercede for them before God. As we look upon your life you remind us that we must dream together in order to make manifest an evangelical world.

We are convinced that the witness to a “holy unity” today demands reflection on the relationship between the First and Second Orders. We cannot ignore that “one and the same Spirit inspired the friars and those poor ladies to leave this world.”²¹

What significance does this truth have in our lives? We are convinced that holy “unity allows us to assume, in the diversity of vocations, the profound fullness of the dimensions of the Church that the Council defines as being completely fervent in action and totally dedicated to

¹⁹ 1LAg 12.

²⁰ Cf. *Deus Caritas est* 7.

²¹ 2C 204.

contemplation... If it is not acceptable for the female branch to be subject to the male branch neither is a total separation an acceptable solution. Indeed, that would be damaging to both the brothers and the sisters. Our Orders can instead offer the Church and the world the witness of a healthy and necessary complementarity lived between the two branches and an attitude of a great mutual respect, but at the same time in a fellowship of mutual aid – that would reflect the image of the Church as communion.”²²

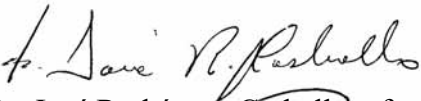
Maybe it is time to consolidate a relationship between us that knows how to combine autonomy and reciprocity. We are aware that it is not for change or for protection that you live the charism of holy unity. Rather, in listening to one another, with mutual respect and in a contemplative attitude our common riches and the diversity that creates our own uniqueness so beautiful gives credibility to our witness to communion lived in God without confusion and without dependence.

➤ ***The Lord bless you and keep you...***

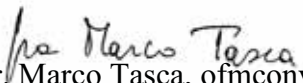
We want to dream with you so that Clare might see the realization of the *Rule* in its entirety among her daughters. If the reality of Francis and Clare continues to be visible in the world it is because God still continues to count on us, and particularly on you, so that the original inspiration that the Spirit once entrusted to our founders might take shape today. Who knows what further impact this might have in our time through the witness of the Poor Sisters of St. Clare in the Church and in the world!

With Francis we want to renew our commitment to you: “Since by divine inspiration you have made yourselves daughters and handmaids of the most High King, the heavenly Father, and have taken the Holy Spirit as your spouse, choosing to live according to the perfection of the holy Gospel I resolve and promise for myself and for my brothers always to have the same loving care and special solicitude for you as for them”²³ And, with Clare, we would like to ask you to continue to “be eager to observe what you have promised the Lord.”²⁴

To the praise of Christ


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Rome, February 2, 2011

²² *Reciprocity and complementarity between the Friars Minor and the Sisters of St. Clare*, Report of the Minister General, Hermann Schalück, OFM, to the International Congress of the Assistants to the Federation of the Franciscan Contemplative Sisters (September 3, 1996).

²³ RegCl VI:3-4.

²⁴ BICl 15.