Clare and the Justice of the Kingdom
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One of the heartening aspects of recent Franciscan scholarship has been the way in which Clare has come more to the foreground and is being studied as a significant person in her own right. Sometimes in the past she has been portrayed as ‘the nice little woman in the background’ but she was far more dynamic than that. Some of the scholars responsible for this development are present at this Conference, so it is a great pleasure to be able to acknowledge their work publicly.

The more I read Francis and Clare, the more I am struck by the logic of their thinking, especially about the Gospel. They went straight from Gospel to action. Today I would like to focus on one area of Clare’s Gospel thinking because she gives us three pieces of guidance which would help us in our present ecological crisis.

To understand Clare’s thinking on this and many other issues, we must root it in a very early incident in the life of the fraternity, something which happened to the brothers before she joined them. In 1208/9 they were returning from their meeting with Innocent III and they rested at Orte, about half way between Rome and Assisi. There they spent fifteen days in prayer and discussion, starting with the words: Seek first the Kingdom of God and its justice.¹ Thomas of Celano tells us that they resolved to keep seeing things in that light and they committed themselves to the justice of the Kingdom, to living with awareness that all are children of the one Father. They explored the implications of sharing, non-possessiveness and even non-ownership. They personified this attitude as the Lady Poverty which they meant living by the values and justice of the Kingdom of God. Here they made a life-long commitment to Most High Poverty. This was only four or five years before Clare too came into that charged atmosphere, at a moment when, in Thomas’ words, they were learning how to be ‘zealots for the new justice’² and ‘true proponents of justice’.³

1. How to care for the land on which we live

Once at San Damiano, Clare and her small group of sisters began what Francis called ‘being in solitude in a religious manner’⁴ and they set about living in the justice of the Kingdom. We do not know enough about those early years but we can be sure that were open to every challenge which came through the poor and the lepers and through the land on which they lived. Among many other questions, must have been this one, what was the Gospel stance towards Mother Earth?

Clare’s mature thoughts on this can be found in her Form of Life in a sequence of chapters on Sine proprio, living without ownership. Here she explores sine proprio from different angles - work, material needs, when we are in the wrong, when we are sick and so on. These reflections can also

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¹ 1Cel 34
² 1Cel 34
³ 1 Cel 35,
⁴ Document on Solitude, 1.
be read as an application of the total availability set out in Francis’ Third Admonition. In this he says simply and uncompromisingly:

The person who offers himself totally to obedience … leaves all that he possesses.\(^5\)

Clare applies this in different areas. In Chapter Six, she speaks of the land where they were living (which was initially diocesan property) and starts by recalling Francis’ final letter to them in which he urges them ‘always to live in this most holy life and poverty’.\(^6\)

They do this, she says, by neither receiving nor having possessions nor ownership, either personally or through another, nor even anything which could reasonably be called property.

Then she speaks about the one exception, the land around their house. Setting this in context, we should remember that when Francis accepted the mountain of La Verna in 1213, it was because the brothers had seen it and assured him it was a suitable place for prayer. The focus was not obsessive poverty but the Kingdom and its justice. So at a time when the post-war merchants of Assisi were buying up property wherever possible (and Francis’ own father owned the strip of land running down Mount Subasio beside San Damiano itself) Clare defined ownership in the Kingdom as possessing nothing. The sisters,

have nothing of their own, not even anything which could reasonably be called property except the amount of land which is necessary for the integrity [honestas] and withdrawal of the monastery.

The land was not property to exploit but a partner in living the justice of the Kingdom. Other beings, both flora and fauna, sharing land and also living in non-ownership, together formed fraternitas with the sisters. This sets the tone for respectful stewardship.

Then Clare goes on:

Let this land not be worked, apart from a vegetable garden for the needs of the sisters themselves.\(^7\)

Throughout Clare’s writings, we find the recurring concept of the exchange, considered in various dimensions. Here we see it in everyday life, that the land supplies the sisters’ needs and they give the land freedom to do its own thing. Parallel to this was Francis’ instruction when the brothers went into the wood to collect firewood, Francis told them not to cut the tree to the ground and take all of it and kill it because, he said, the tree too ‘must be able to have hope of resurrection’. This will later extend into a whole theology exploring the extent of the Incarnation and its relation to everything created.\(^8\) The fraternitas of the Kingdom means that we do not meet our own needs at the expense of other beings. The tree should have hope of resurrection. Today this is called rewilding, an urgent move to restore our planet by acknowledging the rights of others. Francis and Clare would have called this being ‘proponents of true justice’, being aware that all creation is part of the Body of Christ and shares in the resurrection. This is the justice of the Kingdom. This is a far cry from the Genesis mistranslation of ‘Subdue the earth’.

\(^5\) Adm III

\(^6\) RegCl 6,7.

\(^7\) RgCl 6, 12-15.

\(^8\) I am partly thinking of Richard Rohr’s recent book, The Universal Christ, which explores this.
So these are her guidelines for our attitude to the land we live on, but what about when we are away, not at home in some manner? There too she has advice which would, if the whole world adopted it, transform our streets and our nations.

2. How to go about in the world when we are not at home

Clare spells out a very simple fundamental attitude with which to view the world when we are not at home, when we are away or travelling. We are told that when her sisters went outside the monastery, she would remind them to praise God when they saw beautiful trees, flowers and bushes, and likewise always to praise Him for and in all things when they saw all people and creatures. (ProcCan XIV, 9)

Francis, in his Office of the Passion, which we know Clare used daily, goes into even more detail and praising God for

… every creature in heaven and on the earth, and under the earth, and the sea and everything in it. -

The psalmist said: To you our praise is due in Sion O God, which links it back to ‘being a proponent of the new justice’. This extended to include an attitude towards the rest of our planet which is rooted in appreciation and respect, interest and curiosity. Praise is due in Sion for all this, so in her reminder to the sisters, Clare is setting out the stance of justice, giving God what is God’s due. It is an inclusive attitude, without exploitation either of plants, creatures or people.

In her third letter Clare urges us to be open, ‘Gaze, consider, contemplate,’[2Ag 20] - open our eyes, open our minds and open our hearts. She recommends us to walk in the world without judgement, as aware people, ‘woke’ as they say today. This advice is immediately relevant to the ecological crisis and the choices which confront us. Either the world is a resource to be exploited or a complex whole of which we are a contributing member. Adopting the stance of justice opens our eyes to the beauty and the needs which surround us. Considering it, leads us to learn about it, and from this understanding we can accept the responsibilities which God has placed on us.

However I think there is still more in Clare’s text. I once heard Ilia Delio say that to understand Clare we must go to Bonaventure, and at the time I was a bit indignant. But as I have got to know Bonaventure a bit better, I can see that she was right, because what Clare means by ‘gaze, consider, contemplate’ is exactly what Bonaventure develops in Chapters One and Two of the Itinerarium. Both Clare and Bonaventure lead us on a ‘journey of the heart’.10 We start by valuing creation in and for itself (gazing) and then by becoming aware (considering) that every created being is a vestige and an image of the Most High to be contemplated. This is more than spirituality, it is an eco-friendly programme for living which opens us to beauty, truth and goodness at every moment. In Bonaventure’s words:

From visible realities, we rise to the consideration of the power, wisdom and goodness of God in as far as God is existing, living and intelligent, purely spiritual, incorruptible and unchangeable.11

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9 Geste of the Great King, Tau, Praises to be said at all the hours.

10 Journey 1,1.

11 Journey 1,13.
Eric Doyle used to say that all Franciscan prayer begins with the body, and Clare’s recommendation of ‘gaze, consider, contemplate’ follows this same incarnational pattern. We have seen that her policy of only working the land as far as necessary, was justice for the land. If we are wise and contemplative, the creatures of this world will and do lead us from the material to the immaterial. We either flow with this current or against it. Francis even applied this to the breath of the spoken word which can be used with or against grace. He urges us to counteract an evil word with a good one when he says:

When we see or hear evil being done or God blasphemed, let us speak well and do well and praise God who is blessed forever. [1221, XVII, 19].

Every contribution carries weight, and Clare encourages us to move around the world using our ‘spiritual senses’ which Bonaventure mentions in Chapter Four. We are invited to re-learn how to use these spiritual senses in order to savour what Francis called 'the fragrant words of my Lord’ or, when we smell the fragrance of flowers, to be in tune with the One whose fragrance brings even the dead to life again.

3. How to understand the world which God has given us

Today we are only just beginning to understand the intricate dovetailing of species that make up our planet. As time goes on, St Francis’ insights make more and more sense. The original Franciscan call to ‘repair my house’ is still valid, remembering especially what Thomas tells us, that Francis did not build a new church but ‘restored an ancient one with Christ Jesus as the foundation’.12 so Clare’s recommendation to praise God for everything we see, is a wise way to begin restoring our relationship with the planet. In addition to what has already been said, we find much more in her third letter. There she tells us that

An incomparable treasure is to be found in the field of the world and in the human heart. (3Ag 7)

What then is this treasure? That surely is the important question and she answers it when she tells us that when we seek this treasure in the world and in the human heart (including our own) we become a co-worker of God Himself and one who supports from beneath those members of his ineffable Body who are giving way. [3Ag 7,8].

The house to be repaired is more than five small chapels in Umbria. It is rapidly becoming our Mother Earth herself. As a contribution towards that repairing, I would like to pause for a moment on the theological universe in that word 'beneath' - supporting from beneath.

The most extreme and probably the most profound development of this idea is to be found in Francis' Salutation of the Virtues. There he has some lines which must be the most ignored or derided, he ever wrote. He is honouring Queen Wisdom and her sister, Holy Obedience, not a popular lady at any time. Francis tells us, Holy Obedience is the most 'beneath' of all because she is subject and submissive to everyone in the world, not only to people but to every beast and wild animal as well that they may do whatever they want with it in so far as it has been given to them

12 1 Celano 18.
from above by the Lord.  
That is usually dismissed as extreme or silly or crazy, but with the justice of the kingdom in mind it begins to look different. Justice and Holy Obedience, the sister of Queen Wisdom, are closely linked. Once again Bonaventure opens it up for us when he says that ‘Justice makes beautiful that which has been deformed’. There is nothing as deforming as oppression. Clare understood that the logic of the Incarnation means to repair from the ground up, like Francis who did not build a new church but rebuilt the old one on the solid foundation of Jesus Christ. So when he spoke about being subject to every wild beast, he did not mean ‘Stay still and let the crocodile eat you’. What he did mean was that Queen Wisdom and her sister Holy Obedience, who is not to be confused with unthinking obedience, that those two difficult ladies Wisdom and Holy Obedience are essential for understanding the world in which we live. That is where the treasure is hidden, in the field of the world and in its mirror, the human heart. Where we have ignored or exploited the treasure which is hidden there, then we get injustice and deformity. The task for the proponents of true justice is to rebuild on the foundation of Jesus Christ so that we make beautiful what has been deformed.

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13 SalVirt. vol 1, p.164.
14 6 Days of Creation, 1, 34.