

St. Clare of Assisi and St. Agnes of Prague: Their Lives Intertwined by the Four Letters

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ABSTRACT

St. Clare of Assisi was a medieval Italian saint who found the Order of Poor Ladies. She was the first woman in history to write a rule for a convent and successfully got confirmation from the highest ecclesiastical authorities. St. Agnes of Prague was a Bohemian princess and also St. Clare's closest ally. They struggled together for the privilege of poverty for religious women. The two women never met each other, but they had a great spiritual connection, clearly expressed in the four letters from St. Clare of Assisi to St. Agnes of Prague. Some historical and cultural details are also implied in the letters, such as the letter format, titles, and rhetorical method. These four letters are among the few documents that have survived; thus, they are precious primary source for historians studying medieval religious history.

Keywords: *Saint Clare of Assisi, Saint Agnes of Prague, Medieval history, Franciscan Order, Christian saints*

1. INTRODUCTION

St. Clare of Assisi was an important religious figure in the study of Franciscan history. She followed Francis of Assisi and founded the Order of Poor Ladies. To the Bohemian princess St. Agnes of Prague, her closest ally, St. Clare wrote four letters to give her spiritual support and practical advice. The two women shared the same ideal and devoted their lives to pursuing *the privilege of highest poverty*. However, their inspiring story has not been paid attention it deserves. Clare of Assisi was often mentioned for her collaboration with Francis of Assisi in previous research, but she seldom appeared as the main character. Only a few scholars have written academic monographs about the two women's life stories or analyses of these letters, such as *Clare's Letters to Agnes: Texts and Sources* by Joan Mueller and *Light shining through a veil: on Saint Clare's letters to Saint Agnes of Prague* by Edith A. Van den Goorbergh and Theodore H. Zweerman. This is why we want to dig into the letters and do research not only on the story of the two Franciscan women but also on the historical fragments scattered in the texts. Therefore, this article will provide an introduction of St. Clare's and St. Agnes's life behind the four letters and a picture of medieval history hidden in them.

2. THE LIFE OF ST. CLARE OF ASSISI

St. Clare of Assisi was born in Assisi, a town in Italy, in 1193. According to *The Legend of Holy Virgin Clare*, written by Thomas of Celano, Clare was born into a noble and wealthy family [1]. Her father Favaroni di Offreduccio was a knight, and her mother, Ortolana, were also from a knightly lineage in the city of Assisi [1]. People know little about her family because Clare herself wanted to keep silent about her aristocratic parentage [2]. Her childhood was not peaceful, as she experienced the civil unrest targeting the nobilities in Assisi and witnessed the violence and torture generated by people's insatiable pursuit of earthly wealth [3].

She would have been arranged to marry a nobleman in order to develop the estates and power of her family. However, she decided to follow the footsteps of Francis of Assisi, who also gave up the fortune from his father, a wealthy merchant, to pursue extreme poverty for his faith. In 1212, when Clare was eighteen years old, she fled her home one night, defying her family's will, and met St. Francis and his followers in the church of S. Maria degli Angeli. There she was tonsured by Francis, which meant she became worthless as a bride and free to chase a life following Christ [4]. Francis took her to San Paolo delle Abbadesse to get protection from the Benedictines; there, she was disowned by her family. After she went to the Poor Ladies of Sant' Angelo di Panzo, her sister Catharine joined her and resisted her family valiantly. For

that reason, Francis gave her the name “Agnes”, after a Roman virgin martyr.

A few months later, the two sisters resided in the small church of San Damiano, and more women came to join them. The first community of the Order of Poor Clares was found; it was also called the second order of Saint Francis. Francis promised always to look after the sisters and gave them great protection and help. He and his successors gave guidance to them and chose friars as their visitors and correctors [5]. The Poor Ladies followed the form of life provided by Francis, and it was more difficult for the sisters to maintain than the brothers of the Order of Friars Minor because they could not go out to work or beg. When Francis died in 1226, Clare had to face the challenges placed before the sisters herself [6].

Throughout Clare’s lifetime, she devoted her efforts to seeking official recognition of her way of life. She struggled to obtain the privilege of poverty and follow the Poor Christ, not how the world or even the Church expected. In 1218, when Cardinal Ugolino drafted a rule on the basis of Benedictine traditions for them, Clare courageously resisted Ugolino because this rule did not mention their connection with the Orders of Friars Minor and the renunciation of property [3]. Although they accepted the rule, they still kept their original evangelical way of life. After arguing with the authorities many times, she drew up a Form of Life herself, based on the Franciscan Rule of 1223. She insisted on extreme poverty and the Poor Ladies’ relationship with the Friars Minor [6].

Eventually, the Roman See fulfilled the desires of the Poor Clares. In 1247, although the communal property was still recommended, the Order of the Poor Ladies was granted to follow the Rule of Saint Francis rather than the Rule of Saint Benedict. On August 9, 1253, two days before Clare died, Pope Innocent IV approved the ‘privilege of poverty’, in which she outlined her perspective [7]. She became the first woman in history to write a rule for a convent and successfully got confirmation from the highest ecclesiastical authorities [6].

3. THE LIFE OF ST. AGNES AND HOW THE LIVES OF TWO SISTERS INTERTWINED BY THE FOUR LETTERS

The four letters’ addressee, Agnes of Prague, was from Bohemia’s Přemysl dynasty, born to King Ottokar I and his second wife Queen Constance of Hungary, who benevolently supported churches and cloisters [3]. At the age of three, her family sent her to the court of Henry the Bearded, where she was educated by the Cistercian nuns of Trebnitz and introduced the religious lifestyle [3]. Agnes was deeply influenced by her religious education, her familial tradition, and her religious contemporaries like Francis of Assisi and Clare of Assisi. She rejected a

series of suitors, including marriage to Emperor Frederick II.

Agnes used her royal family’s influence to expand the impact of the Franciscan movement. When Francis’s brothers came to Prague in 1225, Agnes built a monastery for them. Committed to the teachings of St. Francis, Agnes accessed to royal funds to construct the first hospice for the sick of Prague, the monastery for women in the manner of Clare, and a residence for the brothers who would minister to them.

In 1234, Agnes and seven other noblewomen from Bohemia with five women from Assisi entered the monastery in Prague. Regarding this event, Clare sent a message of congratulations in the same year, known as Clare’s First Letter [8]. From that time on the lives of the two sisters were intertwined. In 1235, Pope Gregory IX wrote to Agnes and suggested she unite her hospice which generated endowments with the convent to secure its stability. This command was incompatible with Agnes’s desire to live without communal property ownership. She had been committed to Francis’s ideal of radical poverty. She looked for advice from Clare, and as was written in Clare’s Second Letter to Agnes, Clare suggested she ignore the Pope’s proposal vaguely and seek help from Brother Elias, who had become the Minister General of the Friars Minor after Francis’s death [9]. The Third Letter was written after Agnes had asked Pope Gregory IX for instructions to follow the Benedictine practice of fasting and forbidding meat at her monastery in Prague. Agnes knew that in Prague’s northern cold climate, such practice was impractical and extremely difficult to obtain and not in keeping with the lifestyle of the poor. The fourth and final letter that St. Clare sent to Agnes was written in 1253, the year of her death.

Agnes stuck to Franciscan spirituality and followed the life of extreme poverty after Clare passed away. She witnessed the political turmoil at the end of Přemysl dynasty and suffered famine, harsh winter, and riots with the poor in Prague. Staying with Prague’s people, she was the only member of Bohemian royal family who still remained in Prague after the defeat of Přemysl [3]. She died during Lent in 1282.

Against the trend of her time, Clare held that in imitation of the poor Christ, cloistered women should follow the evangelical way of life without owning property. Clare and Agnes’s lifestyle of extreme poverty was uncommon among the religious women of Medieval times. The majority of the young women from affluent backgrounds who came to a life of religion usually decided to enter one of the established wealthier Orders. Few noblewomen would have chosen the austere life of Poor Ladies [8]. Clare and her closest ally, the Bohemian princess Agnes, courageously resisted the reforms of Gregory IX to centralize and push all women religious into following the popular Benedictine Rule.

4. THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL DETAILS HIDDEN IN THE LETTERS

Many historical and cultural details can be discovered from primary sources, and these four letters are no exception. We can find out the writing habits and letter formats of medieval people. At the same time, some of the details, especially the rhetorical method, also reflexes St. Clare's understanding of Franciscan spirituality.

At the opening of Clare's letters, she addresses Agnes in many different ways: the most holy virgin, the most worthy Spouse of Jesus Christ, the Lady Agnes, daughter of King of Bohemia, or sister of King of Bohemia, her favorite daughter [9]. The different titles reveal Agnes's different social identities. As a religious woman who maintains virginity and chaste for the service of God, she was called the holy virgin. Consequently, as a pure and chaste virgin, who, according to Clare's first letter, owns the power to get Jesus's love and become his bride, Agnes was praised as the most worthy spouse of Jesus Christ. Although Agnes had become a nun of Poor Ladies, she kept her title as "Lady" and was addressed as Lady Agnes by Clare. At that time, "lady" could not only be used for female aristocracies but also religious women, since she had been divine nobilities for her commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ, who was "the King of kings" and "the Lord of lords" (Rev 19:16) [6]. As a member of the Bohemian royal family, Agnes was referred to as the daughter and later sister of King of Bohemia because Agnes's father, King Ottokar I, died and her brother Václav I became the King in 1230. In the fourth letter, Clare, who is 18 years older than Agnes, refers to Agnes as her daughter because she is full of praise and love for her.

The four letters all follow the classical structure of letter writing with a formal greeting, body, and closing. Also, similar to much of Middle Age correspondence, the letters are rhetorically and metaphorically expressive [8]. She made frequent use of symbolism and metaphors, among which the bridal symbolism and the metaphor of mirror are two important ones.

Clare uses bridal symbolism when referring to their relationship with Jesus. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, Clare addressed Agnes as "the most worthy Spouse of Jesus Christ" [9]. This title has no association with bridal romanticism, which may lead to misunderstandings when used in religious contexts [6]. Clare uses this particular term carefully only in her personal letters to Agnes. We can also see that although the two sisters never met throughout their lives, they were connected on a very close spiritual level. Although Agnes rejected the marriage to Emperor Frederick II, she has chosen a spouse who is more beautiful than any humankind. Through the bridal relationship with Jesus Christ, Clare tells Agnes that she shall "be chaste, become pure, and be a virgin", when she has "loved Him, touched Him and accepted Him" [9]. The causality here is

interesting since Clare does not say that only when she was chaste and pure could she become the bride of Christ. Clare advises Agnes to contemplate and visualize Him in prayer, and then the bridal relationship with Him will help her make better progress in spiritual transfiguration.

The metaphor of mirror was used many times in Clare's third and fourth letters. She invites Agnes to "gaze upon that mirror each day" [9]. Clare's description of contemplation highlights the importance of visualization in understanding, praising, and practicing prayer. Contemplation is a way to transformation [10]. In the "mirror of eternity", she can not only see her face as the chaste bride of Jesus Christ, but on a deeper level, she is also focusing on Christ. Her image can transform into the image of her beloved bride [9].

5. CONCLUSION

As one of Saint Clare's documents that have been able to preserve to this day, these letters are of high research value. In this research, we highlight the two religious women's lives intertwined by the four letters. Their decision to pursue radical poverty was not only influenced by their education, childhood experience, and social circumstances but also highly inspired by their contemporary Christian Francis of Assisi. As aristocratic women, their life trajectory deviated from that of people sharing the same social background with them. Also, we discover the details of medieval history and culture that should not be overlooked in these letters, such as the letters' writing structure, the greetings and titles, and the use of symbolism and metaphors. Moreover, the letters exemplify the deep bond between Clare and Agnes and the relentless pursuit by these two great medieval women of their desirable form of life, as well as their loyalty and purity of faith and Clare's joyful search for God. Just as the title of the book written by Edith A. Van den Goorbergh, the four letters between the two female saints and Clare's thoughts reflected by them are "the light shining through a veil".

Clare's and Agnes's story deserves more attention. There is still so much more to analyze in these four letters from Clare of Assisi to Agnes of Prague, such as Clare's quotation of the Bible, her theological thinking, and its similarity and differences with that of Francis of Assisi, etc., which could bring inspiration to future research.

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