

THE BEGINNING OF THE LEGEND OF ST. CLARE, VIRGIN

(taken from "The Legend of St. Clare" by Thomas of Celano)

1st Reading

When the vision of faith was faltering in the darkness, and the footing of morals was slipping away, God, the Lover of humanity, raised up the venerable virgin Clare, and enkindled in her a brilliant light that shown through the darkness.

Clare took her origin from an illustrious lineage in the city of Assisi. Her father was a knight. Her home was well endowed, and had abundant means. Her mother, Ortulana, who would give birth to a fruitful plant in the garden of the Church, was herself overflowing in no small way with good fruits. While pregnant, and already near delivery, Ortulana was attentively praying to the Crucified before the cross to bring her safely through the dangers of childbirth, when she heard a voice saying to her: "Do not be afraid, woman, for you will give birth in safety to a light which will give light more clearly than light itself." When the baby was born, she ordered that the child be called Clare, hoping that the brightness of the promised light would in some way be fulfilled according to the divine pleasure.

In her tender years, little Clare began to shine in the darkness of the world through the propriety of her conduct. From the mouth of her mother she first received the fundamentals of the faith, and with the Spirit inflaming and molding her interiorly, she became known as a most pure vessel, a vessel of grace. When her family desired that she be married in a noble way, she would in no way consent, but, feigning that she would marry a mortal at a later date, she entrusted her virginity to the Lord.

Hearing of the then celebrated name of Francis, who was renewing the way of perfection forgotten by the world, she was moved and immediately desired to see and hear him. No less did he desire to see and speak with her, impressed by the wide-spread fame of so gracious a young lady. He whispered in her ears of a sweet espousal with Christ, persuading her to preserve the pearl of her virginal purity for that blessed Spouse Whom Love made man.

Burning with a heavenly fire, the virgin did not withhold her consent for very long. Palm Sunday was at hand, and it was on this night that the man of God planned to receive the young Clare. And so, obeying the saint, that night Clare, leaving behind her home, city and relatives, ran to Saint Mary of the Portiuncula. There the brothers received the virgin with torches, cut her hair, and placed upon her the habit of holy penance before the altar of the blessed Virgin, and the humble servant was married to Christ.

She would move to San Damiano. There, as if casting the anchor of her soul in a secure site she no longer wavered due to further changes of place, nor did she hesitate because of its smallness, nor did she fear its isolation. In this little house of penance the virgin Clare enclosed herself for love of her heavenly Spouse. In this confined retreat for forty-two years, she broke open the alabaster-jar of her body so that the house of the Church would be filled with the fragrance of her ointments.

Remaining enclosed, Clare began to enlighten the whole world and her brilliance dazzled it. The fame of her virtues filled the chambers of noble ladies, reached the palaces of duchesses, even the mansions of their queens. The highest of the nobility stooped to follow her footprints and left its race of proud blood for her holy humility. After the invitation of Clare was made known, not a few, worthy of marriage to dukes and kings, did severe penance, and those who were married to rulers imitated Clare in their own way. So many of these seeds of salvation did Clare bring to fruition by her example, that in her that prophecy was seen fulfilled: Many are the children of the barren one more than of her who has a husband.

Please stand for our Opening Hymn.

2nd Reading

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 the image
of the Godhead Itself through contemplation.

So that you too may feel what His friends feel
as they taste the hidden sweetness
that God Himself has reserved from the beginning
for those who love Him.

Totally love Him.
He, Who, gave Himself totally for your love.
Whose beauty the sun and the moon admire.
Whose rewards are without end;
I am speaking of Him
Who is the Son of the Most High,
Whom the Virgin brought to birth.

He Who is the Truth has said:
Whoever loves me will be loved by My Father,
and I too shall love him,
and We shall come to him
and make Our dwelling place with him.

Cling to Him, therefore, with all your heart,
since it is He Who is the splendor of eternal glory,
the brilliance of eternal light
and the mirror without blemish.

Gaze upon that mirror each day,
and continually study your face within it.
Indeed, blessed poverty, holy humility,
and inexpressible charity are reflected in that mirror,
as, with the grace of God,
you can contemplate them throughout the entire mirror.

Look at the border of the mirror,
that is, the poverty of Him Who was placed in a manger and wrapped in swaddling
clothes.

Then, at the surface of the mirror,
Consider the holy humility, the blessed poverty,
the untold labors and burdens that He endured for the redemption of the whole
human race.

Then, in the depth of this same mirror,
contemplate the ineffable charity
that led Him to suffer on the wood of the Cross
and to die there the most shameful kind of death.

Gaze upon Him ...
Consider Him ...
Contemplate Him ...
As you desire to imitate Him.
If you suffer with Him, you will reign with Him
If you weep with Him, you shall rejoice with Him
If you die with Him on the cross of tribulation,
You shall possess heavenly mansions in the splendor of the saints
And, in the Book of Life,
your name shall be called glorious among men.

From this moment, then, let yourself be inflamed more strongly
with the fervor of charity.
As you further contemplate eternal riches and honors,
and sigh for them in the great desire
and love of your heart,
may you cry out:
Draw me after you, Lord,
and I will run in the fragrance of your perfume,
I will run and never tire.

HER SICKNESS AND PROLONGED ILLNESS

3rd Reading

For forty years Clare had run the course of the highest poverty, when, preceded by a number of illnesses, she was obviously approaching the prize of her exalted calling.

Since the strength of her flesh had succumbed to the austerity of the penance she had practiced in the early years, a harsh sickness took hold of her last years, so that she who had been enriched with the merits of good deeds when well ... might be enriched with the merits of suffering when sick. *For virtue is brought to perfection in sickness.*

At this time, a vision was given to a certain servant of Christ, a virgin dedicated to God in the monastery of San Paolo of the Order of Saint Benedict. It seemed to her that she was together with the sisters in San Damiano assisting at the sickness of the Lady Clare, and that Clare was lying on a precious bed. However, while they were grieving at the passing of the blessed Clare, a beautiful woman appeared at the head of the bed and said to those who were weeping: "Do not weep, children, for her who is about to be victorious."

Her daughters, who would very soon be left as orphans, stood around the bed of their mother, a sword of sorrow piercing their souls. Among them was Agnes, the devoted virgin, filled with tears and begging her sister not to depart and leave her. Clare replied: "It is pleasing to God that I depart. But stop crying, because you will come to the Lord a short time after me. And the Lord will console you greatly after I have left you."

Clare was laboring for many days in her last agony during which the faith of the neighboring regions and the devotion of the peoples increased. She was honored daily by the frequent visits of prelates and even cardinals. What is truly remarkable to hear is that when she was not able to take any food for seventeen days, she was so invigorated by the strength of the Lord that she strengthened everyone who came to her in the service of Christ.

In fact, when a kind man, Brother Raynaldo, encouraged her to be patient in the long martyrdom of so many illnesses, she responded with a very unrestrained voice: "After I once came to know the grace of my Lord Jesus Christ, through his servant Francis, no pain has been bothersome, no penance too severe, no weakness has been too harsh."

But since the Lord was very near and, as it were, already standing at the door, she wished the priests and spiritual brothers to stand by and read the Passion of the Lord and holy words.

Finally, she turned to her weeping daughters to whom she recalled in a praising way the divine blessings while entrusting them with the poverty of the Lord. She blessed her devoted brothers and sisters and called down the fullest graces of blessings upon the Ladies of the poor monasteries, those in the present and those in the future.

The most holy virgin, turning towards herself, silently addressed her soul. "Go without anxiety," she said, "for you will have a good escort for your journey. Go," she said, "for He Who created you has made you holy. And always protecting you as a mother her child, He has loved you with a tender love. May you be blessed, O Lord," she said, "You Who have created my soul!"

When one of the sisters asked her to whom she was speaking, she replied: "I am speaking to my blessed soul." That glorious escort was not standing far off, so turning to another daughter she said: "Do you see, O child, the King of glory Whom I see?"

The hand of the Lord was placed upon another and she, amid her tears, received a joyful vision with her bodily eyes. She turned her attention to the door of the house, and, behold, a multitude of virgins in white garments entered, all of whom wore gold garlands on their heads. – One, more splendid than the others, walked among them and from her crown, such splendor came forth that it turned the night within the house into daylight. She moved toward the bed where the spouse of the Son was reposing and, bending most lovingly over her, gave her a most tender embrace. A mantle, of

the most remarkable beauty, was brought by the virgins and with all of them working zealously, the body of Clare was covered and the bridal bed was decorated.

That most holy soul, therefore, departed to be crowned with an eternal reward; since the temple of the flesh was dissolved, the spirit passed happily to heaven. Blessed is that passing from the valley of misery that became for her the entrance to a blessed life. Now in the place of the farewell meal, she is rejoicing at the table of the heavenly citizens; now in place of the coarseness of ashes, she is decorated with a robe of eternal glory and is blessed in the heavenly kingdom.