

**CLARE OF ASSISI:  
BRINGING HER STORY TO LIGHT**

**MARGARET CARNEY, O.S.F.**

**NOTE TO THE READER:**

Several years ago during a program involving Ingrid Peterson, I presented Ingrid with a small kitchy statuette of Clare, Patroness of Television. Purchased in a novelty shop in Richmond, Virginia, the tiny image showed the abbess dressed in garish green. In her hands she held—in place of cross, crosier, rule or lily, the remote control device! In making my ceremonial presentation, I pointed out that this statue was proof that Clare was becoming an item of pop culture—much as Francis is when depicted in bird baths or mirrored in Brother Juniper cartoons.

While the serious scholar may disdain such excitement over a cheap plastic image, I maintain that recognition of Clare in any form is a sign that we are gradually winning the fight to give her the place that is hers by right at the side of Francis in the popular imagination.

That said, it remains a frustration that when anyone simply asks for a good short biography of Clare, we are out of luck. None exists. Several attempts to outline her life do exist in print and in digital versions. Some are quite lengthy. Others are partial in research or perspective. However, there is no one standard short biography that we can offer with assurance of its historical accuracy, sympathetic analysis of her work and writings, and contextual commentary to help a non-specialist.

Faced with this gap, how do we introduce Clare to general audiences. Faced with that challenge, I devised a lecture that seeks to engage the audience by offering to construct a movie version of her life. I therefore offer this short exercise to Ingrid Peterson's friends, admirers, and peers. It is a humble offering of one who has often done the scholarly research but is also stymied when trying to unwrap her hidden presence for a new audience that has little background and, at times, mixed motives for being there to hear the story.

May my simple *exemplum* serve you in an hour of need.

## INTRODUCTION

Several years ago a novelist, Dan Brown, seized the imagination of readers all over the world with his now famous *The Da Vinci Code*. Shortly after *The Da Vinci Code* became such a sensation his earlier novel, *Angels and Demons*, hit the charts of best sellers and, of course, the movie world as well. I am a college president and, therefore, part of my mental health program is a steady supply of escape literature. So, of course, I read the Dan Brown novels but I admit that when I read them, I was in clear danger of excessive blood pressure elevation. Why? Because I am an academic, and I know how my colleagues and I, in colleges all over the world, work to get the facts right, the precise date, the tested hypothesis, the theory confirmed or destroyed forever by a magisterial conference paper. How can we stand it when Dan Brown is making "gazillions" by turning truth inside out? Is it a wonderful and fanciful read? Of course! On recent printings the dust jacket claims that it is the most read novel ever! Alas *Jane Eyre*! Alas *War and Peace*!

What has captured the curious fascination of thousands in these novels is the underlying theme of a huge conspiracy at the root of the Catholic Church. The conspiracy theory that makes *The Da Vinci Code* fascinating is, of course, that the Church has for centuries hidden the truth about Mary Magdalene and her relationship with Jesus Christ. This deep

thread of secrecy and oppression, of people killing and being killed to protect the secret has a morbid fascination for us. So let me say right now that if I am annoyed with Dan Brown's lack of historical rigor, I do have to admit that he has tapped a nerve of infinite possibility. The story of woman—of women—in the Church is rarely correctly reported.

One such woman is Clare of Assisi—Saint Clare. As we work to bring her story to light—eight centuries after her death—we understand a bit more that Dan Brown is benefiting from our frustration with an ancient pattern of devaluation of the feminine role in Christian history.

How can we share the story of St. Clare? For hundreds of years her work has been overshadowed by that of her famous counter-part—St. Francis of Assisi. Let's start with one important story-telling principle. I am not going to refer to her as Saint Clare. The minute we put saint in front of somebody's name, we elevate them into a special niche and surround them with incense and vigil lights. This puts them safely on a plane far above our earthly status and out of reach from mere mortals like ourselves. Thus, we are spared the tough question of whether or not we should attempt to live the lessons learned from them.

Clare, for all sixty years of her life, was a human being. (And Francis was as well. And all of the other saints.) We can describe her as the foundress of a feminine religious movement, a legislator, a writer, an artisan in the world of fabric arts, a spiritual director, a teacher, and yes, a mystic. What should we try to understand about her? In order to answer that question, I am going to try a little experiment. I am going to place myself in the role of a movie director trying to create a film about her life. In order to do that, I am going to choose five scenes from her life. I will try to frame those scenes as a director might. (I will imagine myself as the consultant to a new Ken Burns series about this woman whom I love and admire so much.)

**SCENE ONE: WAR IN THE STREETS**

The first scene: Clare is six years old. Francis, ten years her senior, is sixteen. It is a gray foggy morning in Assisi and in the upper streets where the nobility, the landed gentry, live there is a sound of thunderous hoof beats, there is chaos in the narrow passageways. Clare's father rushes through the house getting her mother, Ortolana and her sisters, Catherine and Beatrice out of bed. The news is dreadful. Their lives are in danger. Civil war has erupted within the city. Clare's family belongs to that class that has always known privileges of hereditary right. They own vast tracks of land. The men of the family are knights with significant armies in their employ. Their daughters are slated to make advantageous marriages that will strengthen *la famiglia* through land acquisition and additional military power. Each woman's obligation is to preserve herself "pure as the driven snow" no matter what her husband is up to, to govern the children and to take care of the household in his absence. He will be gone often, whether on crusade, at war or on business ventures.

For months before this terrible day, they watched the tremendous social and economic changes taking place in their town and in other towns like it. A new movement of young merchants wanting to make their way by the production of goods and services, by success in sales and trade, is demanding a political voice, demanding a vote on major political agreements. The establishment is not eager to give up its hereditary power. Now armed uprising erupts between the two. But, let us go back to the scene we are trying to film.

As Clare and her family flee from their home, she drops the little toy that she has been clutching to her heart. She wrenches herself away from her mother's grasp, rushes back to rescue the doll. Ortolana wheels around to dash after her little one and stops cold. There, standing between her and the child is one of the partisans, his sword in hand. It is Francesco, son of Pietro Bernardone. How many times had Ortolana made costly purchases in his shop? How could this be? How could he be menacing her darling child this way?

She cries out and now our camera focuses in a close-up shot on the face of Francis. Conflicting emotions swirl over his features. He takes a deep breath. The sword is lowered, he bows in the woman's direction and then he stoops in a courtly gesture, picks up the ragged doll, and gently places it in the girl's arms. A hoarse whisper is wrenched from his lips: Good-bye little Chiara, farewell Signora Offreduccio. Now go. Go quickly!" and he holds back until the women are safely on horseback and on their way to safety in Perugia. Cameras zoom out—darkness.

What do we take away from the scene? Clare and Francis come from very different social classes. They not only do not see one another as equals, they see one another as enemies. But we know at this moment, as they do not, that they will meet again and that meeting will create a convergence of intention and relationship by which they will rename the society that they will remake in the image of Jesus Christ.

**SCENE TWO: AFTER THE EXILE**

As our next scene opens, ten years have passed. Clare is sixteen years old. Francis is twenty-six. Her family has finally returned from their exile in Perugia and resumed their place in a politically transformed Assisi. In the decade that has passed, a lifetime of changes have changed the course of Francis's life. He tried to join the Crusades but returned home seriously changed in attitude and behavior. He joined in a new war against the enemy city, Perugia. His life has been a series of exploits aimed at earning knighthood but each has ended badly. Finding himself on the losing side at the battle at Collestrada, he served a miserable prison term. A full year elapsed before his city could pay the ransom needed to free him. When he returned home, he was clearly suffering physically and emotionally. Was it a medieval forerunner of today's post-traumatic stress syndrome? He wasn't the same old Francis. Gone were his daily sales experiments in the shop. Gone were his frequent and fabulous parties. He was changed. He was confused. He was depressed. He disap-

peared for long periods of time. He didn't make much sense to boyhood companions, to his parents and brother. However, little by little he was making a new sense out of his experiences of failed ambitions.

And the sense he made of it was that he was being called by the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ, to step back from this military economic pursuit and to try to establish an authentic way of living the Gospel within the working people of his city. He became a volunteer, he was doing service work; he helped poor churches; he went to the edge of the city and took care of the sick poor — the lepers who had no social system of protection and for whom there was no safety net. Eventually, because he was trying to do this as a committed Christian, the bishop, who was one of a few people in Assisi who understood, would invite him to preach in the cathedral located next to the palazzo of the Offreduccio family.

So the camera plays across the wide expanse of the cathedral. Clare enters the Cathedral and takes her place. She strains to see the preacher who moves about as he speaks. Here was the young man who wanted to make his mark. How was it that he turned from the warring ways that had terrified her as a child? How was it that he gave up the lucrative business of the family? Francis is in the pulpit speaking with fiery but humble conviction? The townspeople gape. Her head shakes from side to side in bewilderment. What is going on? What should she believe about her former enemy? Why did the change in him trouble her so profoundly? She was, after all, in a position any young woman would envy. Her family was still seen as one to be reckoned with, even if no longer as powerful politically. Uncle Monaldo, the senior member of the Offreduccio clan, was carefully screening the men proposing marriage. Her education was preparing her for a life as the leader of a noble family. She would be able to read and write, to arrange the affairs of a great house, manage servants, treat the illnesses of the extended family and bring her children up as God-fearing Christians. But nothing about that prospect made her happy. She longed for a radical freedom. She intuited a path of peace, of simple economic

structures in which women would carve their own destiny, a life that took the words of Jesus in the Gospel as sacred daily instructions, a life that did not force her to choose between the roles of Martha and Mary. Was it possible or was she doomed to follow the narrow path cut out for the women of generations before her own? The sermon ends. Francis exits but glimpses Clare as he turns to the door. He nods and whispers with downcast eyes: "Pax Christi, Signorina Offreduccio."

The camera zooms out—darkness.

What does this scene tell us? It tells us of two young people who have experienced incredible familial and personal dislocation because they are caught up in titanic struggles handed down to their generation. They seem caught in a net from which there appears to be no way out yet Clare sees Francis is a new person. What accounts for it? He has found a way to do something quite original with his Christian identity. She still lives in a safe, enclosed, secure and rich place within Assisi's nobility. The plans for a family sanctioned marriage are going forward. The suitors arrive with painful frequency and she struggles to find compelling arguments that her guardians will accept for her continual refusal.

Let me answer a question right now. Did they become lovers? I know you are all thinking. You would not ask this in front of the friars—I understand. The Margaret Carney theory is no. There is a serious scholarly theory behind that in terms of looking at her writings and looking at all the evidence that we have for the way in which their relationship developed. There is also a very pedestrian theory which I heard handed down by well meaning Franciscans. He was homely, she was pretty. Now, ladies, we know that that isn't everything, right? But I think that we don't necessarily want to get caught up in the speculation, and I don't want Dan Brown to write this novel. I know what will happen.

### SCENE THREE: THE NEW CITY

Two years have passed. Clare has listened to Francis preach, watched as several young leaders of the commune

have followed him by adopting the life of penitents who do manual labor to earn food, spend time in solitude and reach out to the disenfranchised like lepers and serfs. Clare understands that her life is caught in a web of determination. She very much longs for the simplicity and freedom that puts Francis among the working people of the city, a group of people with whom she has had almost no contact other than the servants in her household. This experiment fascinates her. It is not rooted in a political manifesto but in a serious reading of the Gospel. Unable to contain her curiosity, she succeeds in finding ways to meet and converse with Francis without her family's knowledge. What he is doing should not be limited to men. Women are called to live this kind of evangelical commitment. She is certain of this and she is just as certain that any woman who tries will pay a great price. To break with her family's expectation is a form of social suicide. After agonizing months of prayer and argument, she comes to the chilling realization. She must leave this shelter of privilege and power. She is going to join Francis and the new community of brothers. She will risk everything — reputation, physical safety, the primal bonds of daughter, sister — to be part of this Christian adventure.

Francis realizes the risk they both assume and asks for the protection of the bishop. Will he assist them in the work of creating a Christian commune within Assisi's commune of wealth and war-mongering? Not only does the bishop agree, he helps to create the best scene of our movie.

Palm Sunday was a very special day in medieval Europe because it was the end of winter. The "rites of Spring" included a great procession in which the women dressed in their best new finery. They purchased gorgeous silks and brocades that Pietro Bernardone brought from the trading fairs of France. It was a competition of status, style and wealth—a kind of Project Runway meets Holy Week Ritual.

Of course, the men were there at the church as well to do their Christian duty *and* to check out the ladies in their finery. This "checking out" was no doubt going on for both genders. Typically, unmarried women did not converse with men

unless in the presence of a chaperone. These great religious festivals were one of the exemptions to that rule.

So, let us focus the camera. Clare arrives dressed as if for a wedding feast. The Spring light turns her golden hair to fire and her cheeks burn with the tension of the hour. She joins the throng of gorgeously attired women who form a line to receive the customary branch of palm. But before she can leave her place, the bishop himself brings her a palm branch, breaking the rhythm of the procession. This dramatic gesture—which caused heads to turn—was a signal to Clare that the plan was to be executed at nightfall.

The scene shifts. It is dark and a curfew sounds over the walls as the torches that light the streets are doused. At this signal, Clare escapes from her home by a door that was unguarded. A co-conspirator escorts her through the gates of the city whose guards appear to be taking part in the plot. She and her guides walk by torchlight along a twisting pathway to the valley below where starlight and candlelight mingle as the brothers await her. She comes across the field to the small stone chapel of Our Lady of the Angels. Her beautiful dress is exchanged for a plain woolen tunic, her hair is cut short in the manner of women consecrated for life to God's service. A short veil to signify that she is no longer eligible for marriage is placed on the shorn head. Clare stands in the circle of brothers and accepts their words of welcome and promise of prayer and support. For some, this radical activity creates anxiety and more than one shivers, as much with fear as with the chill wind coming off Mount Subasio. Clare promises to share their life in a relationship free of sexual compromise and open to new equality as brothers and sisters. The first Franciscan woman is ready to go to work.

What do we take away from this scene? A woman brave enough to step out of the pre-destined mold created by society and her family legacy, a woman and a man willing to risk a new mutuality and a quality that bridges the gap of social classes that were once enemies, a woman and a man who had once been enemies making common cause, not based on sexual intimacy but on a shared and exciting life project. She

will follow the brothers in intention but create her own city of ladies in which women will have a vote on important decisions – a privilege women did not enjoy in any city governed under the tradition of Roman law at that time. This would be a new moment in Christian society.

#### SCENE FOUR: A WOMAN'S WORK

It is 1244. Francis has been dead eighteen years. Clare, in spite of serious illness that leaves her frail and gray-haired continues her work. We are in front of San Damiano—the small chapel and hospice-convent where she began her sisterhood. It stands midway between the commune and the fields of the Valley of Spoleto. Our camera focuses on a small group of men on horseback winding its way down the path from the city. This group of merchants dismount at the small plaza in front of the chapel and a business exchange takes place. The sisters come to the gates bringing with them beautiful pieces of woven silk, woolen and linen materials and turn them over to the merchants. They have done this work in the confines of their home—it's a cottage industry model—and in exchange the merchants supply them with the goods of their daily life; firewood, vegetables, bread, flour, wine, oil. Our merchants express their satisfaction with the trade and admiration for the women whose financial and familial model inspires many in the nearby towns. The tradition of the time was that women lived in great abbeys with huge feudal estates and they were cared for by the endowments given by their families or by the rent of their lands. Clare had decided that she and her sisters would earn their own way while serving the needy on the city's margins. Only in this way could they be independent, able to live a sustainable economy for a small group of dedicated women. It would be an evangelical ecology.

As the merchants prepare to leave, Clare reminds them that it has not been easy to maintain this system. The pope himself is hoping to dissuade this monastery and others like it. He hopes to impose the traditional monastic system with

its vast properties and financial obligations upon them. She shakes her head as she and her compatriots discuss the obvious hardship women expected when breaking away from an ecclesiastical welfare society in favor of meeting their own needs by sharing in the grace of work. Francis reminded us always, she urged her listeners, that work was a good and ennobling, and that they must share the fruits of success with those who were outside the net of social concern. The faces and words of her masculine counterparts betray their uncertainty about her views mixed with obvious affection for this brave leader and protector of the city.

The riders shrink from our view as the sunset fills the valley's green bowl with deepening shadows. Clare and the sisters carefully carry their bartered supplies to the door and disappear into its dark confines. The scene fades.

We must pause to understand this exchange. What we witness here is a tough-minded stance by a small group of women who see the fallacy behind the system of patronage and control of women's destinies. No matter how well intentioned—and most of the time it is well intentioned—the result of this kind of legislation hobbles the initiative and silences the voice of women who might offer a harmonic counter-point to patriarchal structures and beliefs. Clare and each sister that follows her rule of life are explorers, homesteaders in a new territory. They are not really welcome because they call into question an organizational model with centuries of credit built up in the church. But it is a new time, a new economic order and a new social option is possible. This woman functions as peer and sister, not as property or servant. She is both admired and feared. As it was in the beginning, is now and ... ever shall be?

#### SCENE FIVE: THE DANCE OF DEATH

Our camera is in the second floor dormitory of San Damiano. The wooden rafters are hung with herbs to lighten the air. Candles shine against the bare stone walls. There, close to the stairwell, lying on a simple pallet of straw, her skin

glistening with the sweat of August's heat, Clare rests. She is sixty and she is dying. For twenty-seven years she has been reminding not just her sisters but also the friars of how they should continue to live out Francis's intentions. The camera swings from Clare's face, panning the circle of sisters and brothers attending her. While the sisters busy themselves with small tasks to lighten her pain, Angelo, Leo, and her beloved cousin, Rufino, chant the *Canticle of Sir Brother Sun*. When they reach the verses that speak of welcoming death, their voices falter. Suddenly, Sister Amata bursts upward into the room from the steep stairwell. "Madonna Chiara," she blurts out, "a guest approaches whom you must receive. Word comes to us from the Sacro Convento. The Lord Pope Innocent wishes to impart his blessing to you." Only Clare remains calm at this news. The brief hubbub of her attendants is soon interrupted by an entourage of red-cloaked cardinals filling the small grey space. They part to allow the entrance of the pope. His face, stark and ruggedly handsome, softens and he moves towards the dying woman. With the greatest brevity he urges her to remember him when she reaches paradise and then, with a courtier's demeanor, he asks if he can offer any other consolation to her in this last hour. Her face is transformed and she appears to see something of infinite beauty glowing beyond the huddled group around her. Yes, she whispers, and then with a voice that suddenly electrifies the room with its strength and timbre she begs him to approve her simple Rule and Life. He nods, places his hand upon hers, and departs amid a rustle of silk and spurs.

The following day, a friar arrives from the Sacro Convento holding the papally signed document that assures that this Way of Life which Clare has authored, this fruit of a lifetime of sacrifice and discernment, will be forever enshrined as a valid life for any woman who seeks to follow her way. For the first time, a woman's legislation has won a pope's imprimatur. Clare kisses the pontifical seal that hangs on its silken cord over and over. The victory of her vision of Franciscan fidelity is assured.

As our camera pulls up and away, Clare's eyes close and a rapturous smile is sealed upon her countenance. The muffled sobs of those left behind are swallowed up in the melodious strains of an ancient Umbrian melody.

What are the final lessons of this movie? What do we take away? Clare was, after all, a teacher. We are looking at a woman who spent her life caring passionately to get her lessons written; to get her lessons approved by the major authorities of her time and to have the written legacy ready to hand on to next generations. She was dedicated to preserving that which must be learned.

Francis and Clare made a commitment to change the way that people related to each other, and they replaced the labels of social class with the beautiful words, "brother/sister." When they used the words brother/sister, they were not using an honorific title. "Brother" and "Sister," for them, was not a title; it was a role description. It told them how they were to go through the world in fraternal and sisterly mutuality with every living creature. They did not leave places of privilege and now and then go down into the hovels of the poor. They changed their own social position, not out of a fatalistic rejection of comfort or economic security but out of a brilliant, intuitive analysis that in order to really reach those left behind by political and ecclesiastical powers they needed to share in their condition. They did not create a mindless ideology of poverty for its own sake. They found ways to connect those "with" means to those whose status was "without." They engaged wealthy friends in the ongoing Franciscan projects. They did not send them away but brought them into dialogue, into an exchange of goods with those in need of their service. We are regularly confronted with new varieties of class struggle that present themselves as definitive solutions to the world's ills. Francis and Clare would not have used such methods. Their community was an early version of social entrepreneurship in which talents and insights were harnessed to bring all levels of the members to a common table, whether that table was for celebration or negotiation.

As our movie-making experiment ends, we realize that there are dozens of other moments that might be scenes of high drama and lasting impression. The selection of these scenes follows a specific thread. They allow an audience to see in moments captured in tableaux fashion the seeds of a social justice consciousness that today is exhibited with endless creativity and heart-warming faithfulness wherever Franciscans are at work. We might as easily have focused on creative engagement with the Church, kinship with nature, preaching a successful Christian movement, or the profound spiritual quest of both Francis and Clare.

Perhaps we will find a Ken Burns willing to work to achieve our hope of developing our appreciation of Clare as a woman of intense intellectual focus, single-minded dedication to a Gospel project, utter fidelity to God-given friendship. May this small experiment help all who want to bring Clare "out of the shadows" and find enjoyment in so doing.



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# SPIRIT AND LIFE

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**“HER BRIGHT MERITS”  
ESSAYS HONORING  
INGRID PETERSON, O.S.F.**



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## CONTENTS

Contributors to this Volume .....	v
Introduction	
<i>Mary Walsh Meany, Ph.D.</i> .....	1
Franciscan Medal Citation .....	7
Fruitful Friendship	
<i>Ramona Miller, O.S.F.</i> .....	11
Clare of Assisi: Bringing Her Story to Light	
<i>Margaret Carney, O.S.F.</i> .....	25