

St. Clare of Assisi

(July 16, 1194—August 11, 1253)

Family Background

St. Clare of Assisi was born Chiara Offreduccio, the eldest daughter of Favorino Sciffi, Count of Sasso-Rosso and his wife Ortolana. According to tradition, her father came from a wealthy, ancient Roman family and her mother was a very devout woman from the noble family of Fiumi. They were hella rich, owning a large palace in Assisi and a castle on the slope of Mount Subasio.

Her Relationship to Francis

At 18-years-old, she first heard the ministry of St. Francis. He was asked to preach at the Church of San Giorgio at Assisi during Lent. Moved by him, she asked him help her live out the Gospel in her own life. On March 18th, 1212 (Palm Sunday of that same year), after attending mass in finery, Clare secretly met Francis at the chapel of the Porziuncula. Francis received her vows to the religious life; her hair was cut off and she was given a plain robe/veil to wear.

Clare was so devoted to Francis that she was sometimes called “alter Franciscus,” or another Francis. Clare even nursed and took care of Francis toward the end of his life and was with him when he died in 1226.

Effects and the Growth of the Poor Clares

Clare’s father was absolutely furious at her refusing his orders to marry after he had set up an arranged marriage to a wealthy man; thus, he attempted to make her return home by force, but failed. Within a month, Clare’s younger sister Catarina, who took the name Agnes (and was later sainted as well) joined her at the Benedictine convent where Clare was staying until a separate dwelling was built for them at the church of San Damiano. Her mother, Ortolana, also later joined her order.

After her sisters entered religious life, the youngest, Beatrice, found herself heir to everything and was under the care of their powerful maternal uncle, Monaldo (presumably Ortolana joined the



Master of Heiligenkreuz, The Death of Saint Clare, c. 1400/1410

convent after the death of her husband, which was not uncommon). Once we turned eighteen, she was pressured to marry as well, but instead, she gave all of her inheritance to the poor and joined her mother and sisters at the convent of San Damiano. She passed away in 1260 and she and Ortolana were given the honored title of Blessed (essentially not all the way, but a step toward sainthood).

Other women joined the Offreduccio women, and they became known as the “Poor Ladies of San Damiano.” They all lived a simple life of austerity, seclusion from the world, and poverty. They went barefoot, didn’t eat meat, and were mostly silent, with lives consisting of manual labor and prayer. Francis temporarily directed the order, but by 1216, Clare was the abbess of San Damiano. The Order of Poor Ladies was officially changed to the Order of Saint Clare in 1263 by Pope Urban IV, ten years after her death.

Saint Claire—A Radical Life

Saint Clare’s lifestyle as a religious and the internal rules of her order were both radical and an implicit challenge to medieval notions of the limitation of women: “her insistence on the complete Franciscan Rule of Poverty was in part based on her conviction that religious women were capable of surmounting every hardship to which men might be exposed” (Petroff 43).

In 1216, Clare along with her followers was given the Privilege of Poverty (living without communal property or individual possessions) by Pope Innocent III when she requested it; however, She continued to fight for full approval to follow her own “rule” in the spirit of Francis’ teachings, replacing the Benedictine rule that Cardinal Ugolino (later Pope Gregory IX) had adapted for her order, which she believed watered down their commitment to absolute, abject poverty. Full approval was not given until days before she died. Clare was the first woman in the history of the church to have written a rule for women.

There was some tension later between the Franciscans and the Clarisses, mostly in relation to meeting the nun’s spiritual needs, ministering to the sacraments etc. Some of the Franciscan monks complained about the responsibilities, arguing that they pulled them from their own ministries/prayers/works. An interpretation of a papal order as excusing them from this, led them to stop giving the women pastoral care. Pope Gregory VII made the brothers minister again to the women, after Clare threatened a hunger strike (Knox 45).

Miracles and Works

Clare is credited with miraculously twice saving Assisi from attacks and destruction through prayer. In 1958 Pope Pius XII declared her patron of television, citing an incident during her last illness when she miraculously heard and saw the Christmas midnight mass in the basilica of San Francesco on the far side of Assisi.

After 1224, she was bedridden from poor health for the rest of her life. She was made the patron saint of television in 1958 by Pope Pius XII due to one of her miracles, a vision. When St. Clare was very ill, she could not attend mass. She was reportedly able to see and hear the Christmas mass as it was happening as if projected on the wall in her room. She was canonized a saint by Pope Alexander IV on September 26, 1255, only two years after her death.

St. Francis of Assisi

(1181/82—October 3, 1226)

Background

St. Francis of Assisi was baptized Giovanni, the son of Pietro di Bernardone, who was a cloth merchant. Pietro later changed the infant's name to Francesco, likely as a reference to his mother's French heritage. Francis learned to read and write Latin at the school near the church of San Giorgio. He was quite invested in music and worldly pursuits in his youth. In 1202, he went to war, a fight between Assisi and Perugia. He was captured and held prisoner for almost a year. He fell seriously ill when he was released.



St Francis of Assisi, 13th-century painting.

After recovering, he was planning on going back to war, but he had a vision that told him to return to Assisi—this is where he began to pray and ask God for direction. Another key experience that set him on his journey as a Saint, was a pilgrimage to Rome, where he spent time with the beggar's and begged with them in rags in front of St. Peter's Basilica.

Events of the Play

He was quite spontaneous and impulsive in his attempts to change his life, as depicted in this play. He stole some cloth from his father's shop and sold it. He tried to donate the funds to a priest, who refused as it was from ill-gotten goods. Angry, Francis is cited as either throwing the money to the ground or out the window.

Afraid of how his father would respond, Francis hid in a cave near San Damiano for about a month. When he returned, His father, furious beat him and kept him pretty much under house arrest. He then tried to punish him in court, but Francis refused to attend. When he was brought before the Bishop for punishment, it is said that he, as 'recompense', stripped off his clothes and gave them to his father. The bishop gave him a cloak to cover himself, and Francis went alone to the woods above the city.

The story of Francis kissing the leper in the play, is in fact canonically believed to have occurred, early on as a part of his radical shift in lifestyle and beliefs (37-38). Some stories cite him as kissing the leper on the lips, some on the hand.

He also is known for creating the first nativity play, recreating the manger of Bethlehem at a church in Greccio, Italy, in order to show the importance of being devoted to the humanity of Jesus. However, Atik has very much played around with the

timeline as this occurred in 1223, long after Clare was already a religious, and three years before Francis' death.

Importance and Impact

He was the founder of the Franciscan order, and the leader of the evangelical poverty movement in the early 13th century. He also founded a lay order (Third Order) for those who wanted to follow these principles but needed to remain in the secular world. He was known for an intense charisma and evangelical zeal, which ended up drawing in thousands of followers, like Clare. Francis considered all of nature and earth as a mirror of God, calling all living creatures his brothers and sisters, whether that be animals (which he is best known for his devotion to, including stories of preaching to birds and talking a wolf into not terrorizing the people of Gubbio), or the often-dehumanized poverty-ridden people of Italy. He is commonly portrayed as wearing a brown habit with a rope tied around his waist, that has three knots in it, which symbolizes the three Franciscan vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

The Importance of Blue

The color blue is highlighted several times throughout *Poor Clare*. This is not coincidental, as this color held very particular religious meaning and connotations in the medieval setting of the play. Blue is connected to faithfulness to God, to Jesus, and especially the Virgin Mary, mother of God. However, it is not generally used liturgically, meaning a priest would not wear this during religious services (there are a very few exceptions). Francis, by wearing blue, is thus setting himself apart from the rest of the organized church, which he views as being too 'buyable' and complacent (35).



The Visitation of Virgin Mary to Elizabeth
(14th c. wall-painting in Timios Stavros Church Pelendri)

There is a long tradition of representing Mary as wearing blue in artistic depictions. This has its origins in early Byzantine art (c. 500 AD), where clothing Mary in a dark blue mantle, was a great honor, as it was the color of clothing worn by the empress (Staudt). Blue was a rare and precious color (and thus very costly to use for paint), thus it symbolized royalty. In historical times, the blue of her head covering would have denoted her divine status, through the connection with royalty (those considered to be placed above others by divine right) thus elevating Mary's image as Queen of Heaven. The connection between this blue imagery and the idea of Mary as Queen of Heaven, is likely why Francis ends up shifting his costume for a more drab brown. When Clare describes the blue robe as "Very striking", Francis responds uncomfortably: "Well I don't want people to look at me and think 'cool robe'!" (20-21).

Part of his goal is to show the Holy Family as representative of the poor and disadvantaged in society, which they were. After the birth of Jesus, Mary and Joseph were "to offer a sacrifice, according as it is written in the law of the Lord, a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons" (Luke 2:24). The ideal sacrifice would have been a lamb under Hebrew law, but the two birds was an

allowed exception only for those too poor to be able to afford the lamb (Leviticus 12:8). This is part of what Francis wants to show with his Nativity scene: “I want people to really *get* what it was like, that this family was *poor* and desperate. I don’t think anyone understand that anymore” (50). Francis perhaps recognizes that despite his good intentions with the blue, it is still a kind of vanity and using his silk merchant father’s influence as “His father’s wealth paid for his clothes” (18).

The exchange between Beatrice and Clare shows the contradictions in how the color blue is understood, but also the journey of the lead character. Beatrice wants to have a dress that is “purplish-blue” decorated “with gold thread” and Clare at the time describes liking the idea because “Blue is like, modest. It’s what Mary wore” and thus to wear it seems “deferential” (11). Here, clearly at the beginning of the play Clare doesn’t consider the connection between being able to wear this blue and their family’s wealth and status.

The blue did also carry connotations of purity/holiness, due to its connection with the sky and the heavens (and thus God’s Heaven), and modesty, likely due to its connection to Mary. Biblically, however, blue was a more general sign of both God’s ever-presence and man’s obedience to him. In Numbers, it is described how blue should be worn by all of God’s people: “Speak to the people of Israel, and bid them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put upon the tassel of each corner a cord of blue; and it shall be to you a tassel to look upon and remember all the commandments of the Lord, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to go after wantonly” (15:38-39).

Mary, as the literal person through which God’s real presence was manifested as man, would make sense to be symbolized using blue, as she represents the presence of God, which is coded with blue also in the cloth that was meant to be use with the ark of the covenant (Numbers 4:4-5). Atik consistently uses blue in connection with ‘The Poor’, referencing how “Bright blue tarps provide shelter from the elements” at the homeless encampment (39). She, like Francis, suggests that those in poverty are the true representation of Christ among us, that they are more in line with holy family, and closer to being Godly, than the rich of the play.

The Issues of Poor Clare

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but the distribution of wealth right now is insanely unequal, like, insanely” (22).

Socio-Economics & Wealth Disparity

Throughout this play, Atik is very intentionally drawing connections between the ‘then’ and the ‘now’ throughout the play, especially with its themes of socio-economic divide. According to the Economic Policy Institute, those with incomes in the top 1% take home 21% of the total income made in the United States (“Income inequality in the United States”). Thinking about this issue more locally, Missouri is ranked #17 out of the 50 states in income inequality (“Income inequality in the United States”). In Missouri, St. Louis County is the most unequal county with the top 1% making 32.2 times more than the bottom 99% (“Income inequality in the United States”). According the reporting from Pew Research Center, from 1998 to 2007, “the median net worth of the richest 5% of U.S. families increased from \$2.5 million to \$4.6 million, a gain of 88%” (“Most Americans Say...”). Meanwhile the middle-class is disappearing: “The share of American adults who live in middle-income households has decreased from 61% in 1971 to 51% in 2019” (“Most Americans Say...”). This is being exacerbated by the effects of generational wealth: “Wealth inequality within

countries is typically much higher than income inequality. It has followed a rising trend across countries since around 1980, similar to income inequality. Higher wealth inequality feeds higher future income inequality through capital income and inheritance” (Qureshi).

Atik wants us to reconsider the ways we, along with most of the characters of *Poor Clare*, view this as ‘normal.’ She is very intentional to draw connections, for example, she describes that all of the elements of the “homeless encampment” of Scene 8 should “look contemporary” (39). Atik is very clearly satirizing poorly thought through contemporary responses to poverty, even as she empathetically engages with the characters that in many ways are failing to meaningfully address it. Atik also relates the issues of war to homelessness. Veterans are disproportionately represented in the unhomed population, as is shown in the speech by the Beggar in scene 10, describing his trauma and dislocation following his return from the crusades (49). This is particularly relevant right now, as it is reported that “the number of veterans experiencing homelessness has increased by 7 percent between 2022 and 2023” (“Veterans”).

What Do We Do About It?

There’s a joke in the television show *Community*, where the activist Britta gets taken to task for trying to bring awareness about a political issue: “You don’t have to yell at us. Nobody is on the other side of this issue” (S2, E3). The issue of poverty is a similar situation. Almost no one would say that income inequality is a good thing, but also they don’t want to lose the status, power, and wealth that they have to change it.

A big question throughout the play is the issue of what we can actually do to help the poor? What would actually be required to really change the way that things were, and are, with huge income inequality? Clare and Beatrice criticize Francis for his act of stripping naked in protest, and fairly point out that “there are better ways to help the poor” (15-18). Yet, they don’t seem to be engaging in consistent work to do so, rather they focus on the one-off gestures that make their family seem magnanimous, such as the three day feast they throw in honor of their uncle where the food goes to the poor (18). As Clare puts it, “It’s a lot of work but we’re happy to do it”, even though Clare is not the one cooking the food or putting in that work, instead it is their family’s hired help doing the labor (18). Francis wants to “radically upend the financial structures of our society and redistribute wealth” (21). Imagining a world beyond the redistribution of wealth, but where “there are no rich people anymore” (22).

As Chiara Atik voices through the characters, the problem is that inequality is ever-present to the point of being normalized: as Clare puts it “we’ve always had peasants” (17). Income inequality has begun to feel inevitable. Even if there are “encampments” filled with “Crying children, starving children, freezing children—” the problem is, as Francis acknowledges, “at the end of the day, no one is willing to go with less so that other people can have more” (23). The top financial priorities cited by 62% of millionaires is “protecting accumulated wealth” (“Millionaires Share Practical Financial Tips...”). The justification by those that are rich is that they ‘deserve’ it because they have ‘earned’ it, even when it is generational wealth. Francis calls out this notion, even as he recognizes that it isn’t Clare’s ‘fault’ she is wealthy: “It’s not anything you did bad, it’s just you, like me, were born into a life of privilege you neither deserve nor earned” (22).

Atik specifically stages the presence of the disadvantaged, even as they are ignored by the other characters: “The Beggar is, once again, slumped in a heap on stage” (25). When they ask for money, Beatrice continues talking to Clare, completely ignoring the man (26). As Francis puts it, “If you

want to help people you gotta at least be able to acknowledge them” (36). But to acknowledge the poor is to have to acknowledge one’s own privileged position in relation to them. Therein lies the problem.

But I’m Not Rich...

Both Clare (at first) and Ortolana bristle at being called rich: Clare tells Francis, “Oh, we’re not rich! We’re comfortable” (22). Later, Clare confronts Ortolana about their being rich, and it is very clear that Ortolana does not want to and doesn’t like being called rich, even though they have multiple homes and can afford “ermine” (29). Ortolana doesn’t realize the privilege she shows when she says “I don’t believe in talking about money” (28), as not having to talk about it, is a sign of just how well-off they are. Rather than admitting they are rich, she focuses on that they aren’t as well off as other families, like the the Portenzas or the Sforzas (28-29). Ortolana refuses to call herself or the family rich, insisting “it’s just not accurate” (30).

Chiara Atik is very intentionally commenting on the human tendency to minimize one’s own good luck and position by pointing to those better off. This is true of the rich today. According to a 2023 Ameriprise study, the majority of millionaires (60%) consider themselves upper middle class (Dickler). 31% of millionaires that were surveyed defined themselves as being part of the middle class and only 8% characterized themselves as ‘wealthy’ (Dickler). Ortolana rather than admitting that money begets money, she credits it to being “smart about money. It’s not so much how big your fortune is as how well you manage it” (28). According to the Ameriprise survey, 80% of the millionaires polled cited “financial planning and investing” as the main thing that helped them build up over \$1 million in savings and “Only 13 percent credited ‘luck’ for their good fortune” (“Millionaires Share Practical Financial Tips...”).

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