

CAPUCHIN POOR CLARES MORGON, FRANCE

Traditional Religious Orders



At the very beginning of his conversion, while St. Francis was repairing the walls of San Damiano, God revealed to him that “Sisters will live there a life of such holiness that they will shine like a light in the whole Church.” Six years later the prophecy’s fulfillment began:

Clare was eighteen years of age when St. Francis came to preach the Lenten course in the church of San Giorgio at Assisi. The inspired words of the *Poverello* kindled a flame in the heart of Clare; she sought him out secretly and begged him to help her that she too might live “after the manner of the holy Gospel.” St. Francis, who at once recognized in Clare one of those chosen souls destined by God for great things and who also, doubtless, foresaw that many would follow her example, promised to assist her. On Palm Sunday Clare, arrayed in all her finery, attended high Mass at the cathedral.... That was the last time the world beheld Clare. On the night of the same day she secretly left her father’s house, by St. Francis’s advice, and accompanied by her aunt Bianca and another companion, proceeded to the chapel of the Portiuncula, where St. Francis and his disciples met her with lights in their hands. Clare then laid aside her rich dress, and St. Francis, having cut off her hair, clothed her in a rough tunic and a thick veil, and in this way the young heroine vowed herself to the service of Jesus Christ. This was March 20, 1212.¹



The new followers of St. Francis's radical observance of holy poverty and the Gospel were first placed with Benedictine nuns for a short while. St. Clare's younger sister Catherine—Sister Agnes in religion—came to join Clare and her companions a short while later. (Eventually her mother and younger sister Beatrix would also join the Poor Ladies). They remained for a time at a Benedictine monastery at Sant' Angelo, where other fugitives from the world joined them. Soon they were provided a rude dwelling adjoining the poor chapel of San Damiano, which St. Francis obtained from the Benedictines as a permanent dwelling for his spiritual daughters. "Thus was founded the first community of the Order of Poor Ladies, or of Poor Clares, as this Second Order of St. Francis came to be known."

In 1215, Clare was made superior at San Damiano, and was abbess until her death nearly forty years later, in 1253. She was a model of all virtues, "a living copy of the poverty, humility, and mortification of St. Francis." She learned by heart the Office of the Passion composed by St. Francis. She lived a life "hidden with Christ in God." According to the historians, there is no reason to believe that she ever left the convent of San Damiano, yet her renown as "the chief rival of Blessed Francis in the observance of Gospel perfection" was so great that she was solemnly canonized just two years after her death by Alexander IV, on September 26, 1255. Construction on the church of Santa Chiara was begun shortly afterward.



The Two Observances

The Ladies of San Damiano at first had a rule of life that was essentially the practice of the counsels of the Gospel. During her lifetime, St. Clare was for the Ladies of the San Damiano convent a living rule, their life patterned on the Franciscans' life and rule, with its high ideal of absolute poverty. But other communities were soon formed in imitation of the convent of Poor Ladies at San Damiano, and the need for a rule was felt. Estates were being donated to these women, but the administration of the property presented difficulties. The Pope decided that Cardinal Ugolino, who was the cardinal-protector of the religious, should accept the estates in the name of the Church. So it was in response to this situation that a second rule, the Rule of Ugolino, the future Pope Gregory IX, was written. This Rule did not raise the question of the ownership of property by the various monasteries, a point about which St. Francis and Cardinal Ugolino did not agree. Many convents were formed under this rule.

The Rule of Ugolino was subsequently modified by Innocent IV in 1247 and finally by Urban IV in 1263. The

St. Clare's Rule was directed to the Sisters of San Damiano alone, so at the closing of the first period of the Second Order's history, there were two observances, the primitive observance and the Urbanist observance.

Colettines and Capuchin Poor Clares

The order suffered very much during the Great Schism of the West (1378-1417), which was responsible for the general decline of discipline. But God raised up a reformer, St. Colette of Corbie (1381-1447) in Picardy, France. Her great life's work was the reform of the Poor Clares. In 1406, Benedict XIII appointed her reformer of the whole order and gave her the office of Abbess General over all convents she should establish or reform. She founded 17 new monasteries to which, in addition to the Rule of St. Clare, she gave constitutions and regulations of her own, which were confirmed by Pius II. This is the origin of the Colettine Poor Clares.

In the 16th century, at Naples, Italy, Blessed Maria Longo, a member of the Third Order of St. Francis, had built a convent and founded a community of Third Order Franciscan Sisters. When their direction was given over to the Capuchins, the friars advised the Sisters to adopt the primitive rule of St. Clare, which they did in 1538. They received constitutions based on those of the Capuchin friars and were placed under the jurisdiction of the Capuchin vicar-general: the Capuchin Poor Clares were born.

The Poor Clare Capuchins of Morgon

In 1990, five aspirants to the Poor Clare vocation presented themselves to Rev. Fr. Antoine de Fleurance, Capuchin at Morgon, France.² For their formation in the religious life he sent them to a convent of traditional nuns for two years.

The time having passed, they returned to Morgon, where the Capuchin Fathers lodged them temporarily at the Portiuncula, a small guest house which till then had served to accommodate guests passing through. After a novena to Rev. Fr. Viktricius,³ in January 1993 a vine-grower's house just ten minutes by foot from the Capuchin Fathers' convent was acquired. Thanks to the Fathers' devotion and their benefactors' generosity, the house was transformed into a monastery; and on August 31, 1993, the Poor Clares of Morgon left the Portiuncula to settle there.

The solemn benediction of the monastery and the cloister took place in 1995.

St. Clare's Spirituality

The Litanies of St. Clare afford a glimpse at the spiritual life of that great pursuer of evangelical perfection:

"St. Clare, Disciple of Christ": This was shown by her great love of poverty, her complete abandonment to God's care; by her love for Jesus Crucified—she taught her Sisters to always remember the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross; and by her love for the Eucharist—at a time when frequent reception of the Blessed Sacrament was rare, "She loved to receive often the Holy Sacrament of the body of our Lord with such great wonder that she trembled all over" (Process of Canonization).

most important one of the changes made by Innocent IV "to secure unity of observance and peace of conscience" was to grant express permission to every convent to hold possessions. Then "on 18 October of [1263] the sovereign pontiff issued the rule which is in the most general observance among the Poor Clares and which has been given the name 'Urbanist' to a large division of the order."

Meanwhile, St. Clare had written her own rule for the Poor Ladies of San Damiano and had secured its confirmation by Pope Innocent IV. She had valiantly defended their essential Franciscan characteristic—devotion to holy poverty. When Cardinal Ugolino became Gregory IX, he offered possessions to the convent of San Damiano. Clare refused them and petitioned the Holy See to be able to continue in holy poverty. On September 17, 1228 (two years after St. Francis' death) Clare received "the privilege of most high poverty." A few days before her death, Clare placed the convent under a rule embodying the spirit of St. Francis more perfectly than did Ugolino's Rule. Pope Innocent IV hurried the rule's approbation, confirming it just two days before St. Clare's death.



“St. Clare, image of Jesus Christ’s mother”: This she was by her hidden, silent life and by her humility and kindness. “When Mother Clare ordered the Sisters to do anything, she commanded with such fear and humility that it amazed us.” She was the image of her whose Magnificat is the most perfect expression of gratitude by her gratefulness to our Lord and to St. Francis and to her Creator. Her last words were “Be praised, my Lord, for having created me!”

“St. Clare, little plant of St. Francis”: St. Clare received in plenitude St. Francis’s seraphic spirit according to Father Exupery. Her life was a life of amazing, joyful penance. St. Clare was always full of joy because she knew she possessed Jesus, the source of all joy and life. “She was never seen disturbed; her life was totally angelic” (Process of Canonization).

The Life of a Poor Clare

The life of a Poor Clare is based on the Gospel with the observance of obedience, total poverty, chastity, and enclosure. It is a life of simplicity of heart, humility, and poverty. Poor Clares do not leave the

monastery; they are subject to the rule of enclosure. They lead a contemplative life of silence and prayer, spending two hours in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament exposed every day. They recite the whole Divine Office in Latin, arising at midnight for Matins.

It is a life of penance, fraternal love, and joy. The nuns sleep on straw mattresses and go barefooted (except in winter). They observe perpetual fast and abstinence all year long, except on Sundays and holydays of obligation. They work with their hands, and depend upon the alms and charity of the faithful.

In the Footsteps of St. Clare

The minimum age for becoming a postulant is 18. There is a pre-postulancy, postulancy, and novitiate of one year. After temporary vows, solemn profession is made. Aspirants to the contemplative life following the Rule of St. Clare should have good physical and psychological balance, a good temper, valor, docility, and simplicity. The Capuchin Fathers of Morgon provide spiritual direction for the convent.

The Order of St. Francis is one of the most ancient and honorable in the Catholic Church. The Seraphic

DAILY SCHEDULE

4:35 AM	Rise
5:00 AM	Lauds
	Oraison (Mental Prayer)
	Prime, Terce, Mass
8:00 AM	Frustulum
8:30 AM	Spiritual Reading
8:50 AM	Obedience (assigned duties)
10:55 AM	Sext and None
11:35 AM	Dinner
12:55 PM	Recreation
1:25 PM	Tasks
2:00 PM	Vespers and Rosary
2:40 PM	Obedience
5:30 PM	Compline and Oraison
6:55 PM	Collation
7:20 PM	Pardon
8:15 PM	Retire
MIDNIGHT	Matins

Order is said to count more saints than any other order (over 400 saints and blessed). Some of the most famous Poor Clares are St. Agnes of Assisi (St. Clare's sister), Blessed Isabella of France (sister of St. Louis IX, king of France), St. Agnes of Prague (13th century), St. Catherine of Bologna (15th century), St. Colette of Corbie (15th century), Blessed Mother Mary Lawrence Longo (16th century), St. Veronica Giuliani (18th century), and Venerable Sister Mary Celine (19th century).

In the 20th century, several Capuchins have been the glory of the Order: St. Leopold of Castelnuovo, "hero of the confessional" (1866-1942); St. Pio of Pietrelcina, the first priest to bear the stigmata (1887-1968), whose motto was "Sanctify yourselves and sanctify others"; and Venerable Sister Mary-Consolata Betrone (1903-1946), whose mission was to spread "the little way of love" taught by our Lord Himself, by the practise of the unceasing, smiling, and confident prayer "Jesus, Mary, I love you; save souls."

Interested persons may come for a stay at the guest house, but reservations must be made far in advance. There are also some hotels in the village of Morgon, which is about 30 miles from Lyons, France.

Generous souls, listen to St. Clare, who tells you: "Our labor here below lasts but a while, while the reward is eternal....Don't let yourself be taken in by the false appearances of a deceitful world" (Letter to Ermentrude).

For information:

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¹ The historical background on the Poor Clares is taken from *The Catholic Encyclopedia* as made available online by New Advent, s.v. "St. Clare" and "Poor Clares."

² See *The Angelus*, September 2005.

³ The Reverend Father Viktrizius Weiss, Capuchin, born at Eggenfelden on December 18, 1842, and died in the odor of sanctity on October 8, 1924. He was the Father Provincial of the Capuchin Province of Bavaria.