



## ST. CLARE OF ASSISI

FOUNDER OF THE SECOND ORDER

AUGUST 12

AT the time when God called St. Francis of Assisi to bring about a renewal of the Christian spirit in the hearts of the children of the church, many of whom "bent all their energies in frenzied quest of honors and of wealth, or passed their lives in luxury and lust," and used their power to oppress the poor and weak, he also raised up a woman who was to assist materially in this spiritual renewal by her life of poverty, penance, and seclusion. This woman was St. Clare of Assisi, who, as tradition tells us, was the daughter of Favorino Scifi, Count of Sasto-Rosso, and of Bl. Ortolano, of the noble family of Fiumi. Born at Assisi on July 16, 1194, she began from her earliest years to practice those virtues whose brilliancy will ever call forth the admiration of God-fearing souls. Already as a child, she was remarkable for her love of the poor and for her tender piety. It was her delight to hear others speak of the love and mercy of the Savior and of the virtues and power of his Blessed Mother, and hence she began early by the practice of self-denial and mortification to detach her heart from earthly things and to "seek the things that are above."

As she advanced in age, her severity towards herself increased. She wore a haircloth under her

costly garments, fasted frequently, and, as much as circumstances permitted, took no part in the distracting amusements of the world. She had a particular devotion to our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, and spent many hours in prayer before the tabernacle. Endowed as she was with great gifts of mind, with great personal beauty and a charming disposition, her hand was eagerly sought in marriage by several suitors; but Clare, to the displeasure of her family, rejected them all, declaring that she wished to belong to God alone.

In 1212, St. Francis came to Assisi to preach the Lenten sermons in the church of St. George. His burning words, and especially the example of his poor and mortified life, greatly moved the heart of Clare. She saw in the Saint a perfect model of virtue, and felt an irresistible longing to follow him in the imitation of the poor Christ. Accompanied by a pious matron, she went to St. Francis and begged him for instructions and advice. He spoke to her of the vanity of the world, the shortness of life, and of the happiness of following Christ, that she at once determined to renounce the world and "live after the manner of the Gospel!" St. Francis, foreseeing that Clare would be for many of her sex a guide to religious perfection, prom-

ised to assist her, and appointed Palm Sunday as the day on which she should come to him.

On Palm Sunday, which in that year fell on March 18, Clare dressed in her most sumptuous garments, attended the solemn services at the cathedral together with the members of her family. All approached the altar rail to receive a branch of palm, but Clare remained in her place as if rapt in a dream. The bishop, seeing this, came down from the sanctuary and placed the palm in her hand. During the night of the same day, the Saint secretly left the house of her father, and accompanied by her aunt Bianca and another companion, hastened to the little church of St. Mary of the Angels, the Porziuncola, where St. Francis and his brethren met her with lighted tapers in their hands. Leading her to the altar of the Blessed Virgin, they solemnly invoked the Holy Ghost. Thereupon Clara laid aside her rich apparel, and St. Francis, having cut off her hair, clothed her in a rough tunic and a thick veil. Thus did the Saint courageously consecrate herself to the service of God and begin a life of poverty and penance that was to attract so many pious and generous souls.

Great was the anger and indignation of Clare's family and friends when they heard of the step she had taken. They hastened to the convent of the Benedictine nuns of St. Paul, where St. Francis had placed her, and did their utmost to induce her to give up her pious resolve. But the Saint remained steadfast. She had but one answer to their entreaties, reproaches, and attempts to drag her home by force: she declared that she had been called by God to his service, and that she would have no other spouse of her soul.

After some time, she was joined by her sister Agnes and several



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other pious ladies. They were then established by St. Francis in a rude dwelling near the church of St. Damian, situated outside the city of Assisi. Thus was founded the first community of the Order of Poor Ladies, or of the Poor Clares, as this second Order of St. Francis came to be called. Clare, much against her will, was appointed abbess, an office which she held for forty-one years. Soon many, desirous of religious perfection, came to the humble convent of St. Damian to embrace the austere life practiced by the Poor Ladies; among them were Clare's mother, and Beatrice, a younger sister.

What shall we say of the holy life of Clare and her community in the quiet of the convent? They had been called by Almighty God to be an example to a proud, avaricious, and pleasure-seeking world, and well did they live up to their calling. The community of St. Damian, and later on the communities in the

cities of Europe, became so many sanctuaries of every virtue,—sanctuaries that attracted thousands of souls seeking to live solely in God and for God, and that called down innumerable blessings on the world. Clare was for all her spiritual daughters a shining model of penance, humility, charity, patience, and of almost constant union with God in prayer. Her love of absolute poverty was second only to that of St. Francis. For love of our Savior, the Saint not only gave up all her possessions, not only joyfully suffered want and privations, but also wished that her Order should possess no income, but should depend entirely on the charity of the faithful. In her love for penance, and in order to atone for the sensuality and licentiousness of so many Christians, the Saint practiced the greatest austerities, using every means to mortify her senses and desires. These austerities, however, did not make her morose and stern; her countenance always reflected the greatest kindness and a holy cheerfulness that is not to be found in the children of the world. Her patience during her long and painful illness was heroic. Far from showing the least impatience, she rejoiced in suffering for Christ, declaring that since she had tasted the bitterness of the passions of Christ, she had never found any pain or sickness that could afflict her. Prayer was her spiritual comfort and strength, and she seemed scarcely ever to turn her thoughts away from God. Her love of our Divine Savior in the Blessed Sacrament and in his bitter passion knew no bounds,—a love that was rewarded in a most singular manner.

In the year 1240, an army of Saracens, mercenary troops of the Emperor Frederick II, marched upon

Assisi. They attacked the convent of St. Damian, and began to scale its walls. Terror stricken the Sisters hastened to their holy abess. Clare, calmly rising from her sick-bed, and taking the ciborium from the little chapel adjoining her cell, proceeded to face the invaders at an open window against which they had already placed a ladder. It is related that, as she raised the Blessed Sacrament on high, the soldiers who were about to enter the monastery fell backward as if dazzled, and the others who were ready to follow them then took flight. It is with reference to this incident that St. Clare is generally represented in art bearing a ciborium.

At length, after many years of painful sufferings, Clare felt her end approaching. She received the last Sacraments with the greatest devotion, and calling her spiritual daughters to her bedside, comforted them, and exhorted them to be faithful in the observance of holy poverty and in the practice of all religious virtues, and peacefully passed to her heavenly reward on August 11, 1253. She was buried the following day, on which the Church keeps her festival. Pope Innocent IV, with his court, came to Assisi for the Saint's funeral, which partook rather of the nature of a triumphal procession. Clare was canonized by Alexander IV on September 26, 1255. Her body was, in 1260, transferred from the chapel of St. George to a new church built in her honor, and buried under its high altar, far out of sight and reach. After having remained hidden for six centuries, and after much search had been made, the Saint's tomb was found in 1850, to the great joy of the Assisians and of the children of St. Francis.

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