

# Clare and St. Francis' s Document on Solitude

by

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In the fall of 1990 I conducted a retreat for the Monastery of Poor Clares in Bordentown, New Jersey. The retreat centered on the prayer of Francis and Clare. Toward the end of the retreat, we examined prayer in the solitude of Francis in light of the "Rule for Hermitages." After an explanation of the "Rule," we spent the last three days experiencing its rhythm. At the end of the time one of the Poor Clares handed me a sheet of paper with a list of the many quotes from the writings of Clare which she felt paralleled Francis's text. I took the list home with me, where it sat on my desk for several months until Easter week, when I made my own annual retreat at the Monastery of Poor Clares in Stamford, Connecticut. Alone in the quiet for the week, I was able to pick up the rhythm of their life. And then the list came back to me as well as the parallelism between the "Rule for Hermitages" and Clare's writings. I would like to go through the "Rule for Hermitages," sharing the list as well as some commentary from the rhythm I experienced at the Stamford Monastery.

1. Those who wish to dwell in a religious way in hermitages may be three brothers or, at the most, four; let two of these be the 'mother' and have two 'sons,' or at least one.<sup>2</sup>

In the Mirror of Perfection we read:

When the friars have received the blessing of the Bishop, let them go and mark out the boundaries of the land which they have accepted for their house, and as a sign of holy poverty and humility, let them plant a hedge instead of building a wall. Afterwards let them erect simple huts of clay and wood, and a number of cells where the friars can pray or work from time to time in order to increase their merit and avoid idleness (SP 10).

This gives us an idea of the way the early friars lived. Most of the surviving hermitages we see today—Carceri, LaVerna, Poggio Bustone, Greccio, to name a few—are on secluded mountains, and one can still see remnants of caves friars would have used.

Clare writes, in two different texts:

The Abbesses are bound to observe it [poverty and] . . . are not to receive or hold on to any . . . property . . . except as much land as necessity requires for the integrity and the proper seclusion of the monastery; and this land is not to be cultivated except as a garden for the needs of the sisters (RegCI VI.4-6).

Let both the sister who is in office and the other sisters exercise such care and farsightedness that they do not acquire or receive more land around the place than strict necessity requires for a vegetable garden. But if, for the integrity and privacy of the monastery, it becomes necessary to have more land beyond the limits of the garden, no more should be acquired

than strict necessity demands. This land should not be cultivated or planted but always remain untouched and undeveloped (TestCI 16).

The Stamford monastery (on diocesan property) is an old house on twenty-two acres of land. The sisters make use of the land for prayer in solitude and for a small garden. The monastery presently has four members, so they almost literally align themselves with this part of the "Rule for Hermitages." On this land, the sisters are able to experience solitude—a solitude in fraternity—as Francis indicates in the first verse of the hermitage "Rule."

Francis uses the term mother, a term he uses in the Later Rule (6:8); the same term was used to refer to him in Second Celano 137. Clare uses the term when she writes: "elect another as abbess and mother . . ." (TestCI 24). The term mother conveys not only concern and work, but also an attitude that is delicate, sensitive, warm, affectionate, tender. These qualities are evident in abbesses and also in the sisters themselves. There is a general mother-attitude in all to safeguard the solitude of their lives. This will be treated further in the second verse below.

2. Let the two who are 'mothers' keep the life of Martha and the two 'sons' keep the life of Mary (cf. Lk. 10:38-42) and have one enclosure in which each one may have his cell in which he may pray and sleep.

We saw above how Clare in her Testament calls herself "mother and servant." One who assumes the role of mother or Martha assumes the role of servant, of work. Clare writes: "The sisters to whom the Lord has given the grace of working are to work faithfully and devotedly [beginning] after the Hour of Terce, at work which pertains to a virtuous life and to the common good" (RegCI VII.1).

The Stamford monastery had many works going on each day, including for example, cooking, cleaning, raking leaves, cutting wood, spiritual direction, preparing liturgies, sewing and weaving. All seemed to facilitate the solitude that permeates the monastery. For the most part the work seems to be done in solitude so as to preserve the atmosphere of prayer for each other. And to preserve this solitude Clare calls all the Sisters to "obey their mother . . . so that seeing the charity, humility, and unity they have toward one another their mother might bear all the burdens [work] . . . lightly" (TestCI 20).

3. And let them always recite Compline of the day immediately after sundown; and strive to maintain silence, recite their Hours, rise for Matins; and seek first the Kingdom of God and His justice (Mt.6:33).

Here Francis begins to delineate a schedule for the friars in hermitage that includes the Liturgy of the Hours. Clare writes: "The sisters who can read shall celebrate the Divine Office according to the custom of the Friars Minor . . ." (RCI 2:1). The Monastery at Stamford had its Office of Readings (matins) about 11:30 A.M. In the solitude and silence of my week there, I frequently heard the voices of the sisters chanting parts of the Divine Office in much the same way I have experienced the chanting of the office at the Protomonastery in Assisi.

In writing about silence, Clare reproduces almost exactly the words of the third verse of the "Rule for Hermitages" when she writes: "The sisters are to keep silence from the hour of compline. . ." (RegCI V.1). The silence Francis desires is a profound experience of the hermitage text, deepening the solitude. Clare says: "They should keep silence continually in the church, in the dormitory, and, only while they are eating in the refectory" (RegCI V.2). In my week at the Stamford Monastery—a small building—during the day voices or noise never broke into my silence, or rather I should say, the atmosphere of silence created by the Sisters.

4. And let them recite Prime at the proper hour and, after Terce, they may end their silence, speak with and go to their 'mothers.'

Francis here seems to be laying out a schedule, a time-table for the friars to set the rhythm of the hermitage. Clare approximates this statement of this verse when she writes: "The sisters are to keep silence from the hour of Compline until Terce, except those who are serving outside the monastery" (RegCI V.1). Those serving outside the monastery would be the mothers, performing the Martha-tasks for the community. Then a few verses down in chapter V, almost as if Clare is seeing them all as mothers to each other, she says: "However, they may briefly and quietly communicate what is really necessary always and everywhere" (RegCI V.4). Clare picks up on the silence and the speaking that we find in the fourth verse of the "Rule for Hermitages."

At the Stamford Monastery the sisters prayed morning prayer at 7:00 and mid-morning prayer at 9:30, being very much in silence all this time. Both in the morning before 10:00 and in the evening after night prayer, the sisters take advantage of silence to be Mary to whatever degree they feel called. Around mid-morning (Terce) the sisters seemed to take up their Martha/mother roles for one another—cooking, cleaning, running errands, and the like.

5. And, when it pleases them, they can beg alms from them as poor little ones out of love of the Lord God.

Francis might have wanted to keep the Marys in touch with the rest of the fraternity who went about seeking alms for needs, for food. For the seeker of alms, Clare writes: "Each should make known her needs to the other with confidence" (RegCI VIII.9). And for the one from whom the alms are sought, Clare says:

I also beg the sister who will have the office [of caring for] the sisters . . . [to] be prudent and attentive to her sisters just as a good mother is to her daughters; and especially, let her take care to provide for them according to the needs of each one from the things [alms] which the Lord shall give (TestCI 19).

While alms were not sought for literally at the Stamford Monastery, the people of the area brought alms to the sisters in diverse forms—food and new song books to name two of which I am aware—the people themselves acting almost like mothers to the sisters to preserve their prayer of solitude, which prayer the people value. People also at times drive the sisters to appointments and run errands so they can remain in solitude.

6. And afterwards let them recite Sext, None and, at the proper hour, Vespers.

Francis further delineates a schedule based on the Liturgy of the Hours. And Clare approaches this suggestion of the Hours when she asks "the sisters who can read [to] celebrate the divine office according to the custom of the Friars Minor" (RCI 3:1).

At Stamford the Poor Clares prayed mid-day prayer together after the mid-day meal. Vespers is usually 5:00 P.M.

7. And they may not permit anyone to enter or eat in the enclosure where they dwell.

Since the brothers were on the road preaching the gospel, engaged in the active ministry, when they returned and spent time in hermitages, Francis wanted to preserve their silence. So he "hedged" them in and spoke of enclosure for them. Clare has much to say about enclosure in chapters five and eleven of her Rule. Without getting into the details of grilles, locks, doors, and the like, Clare says: "The sisters shall not allow anyone to enter the monastery. . ." (RCI 11: 8). While she is aware of "evident, reasonable, and unavoidable" (RCI 11: 8) necessity, her words here in this chapter on enclosure come very close to those of Francis.

During the week people telephoned or came to the Stamford Monastery. The sisters “hedged” themselves in by the use of a telephone-answering machine during prayer time and times of silence. And one sister would be available to respond to those who came to the door, thus “hedging off” the others in their solitude.

8. Let those brothers who are the ‘mothers’ strive to stay far from everyone and, because of obedience to their minister, protect their ‘sons’ from everyone so that no one can speak with them.

Here Francis is urging the mothers to protect themselves as well as the sons who are in the stance of Mary. For protection of the mothers themselves, Clare writes:

The sisters who serve outside the monastery should not delay long unless some evident necessity demands it. They should conduct themselves virtuously and speak little, so that those who see them may always be edified. And let them zealously avoid all meetings or dealings that could be called into question. . . . They may not dare to repeat rumors of the world inside the monastery. And they are strictly bound not to repeat outside the monastery anything that was said or done within which could cause scandal (RCI 9: 6-11).

Clare insures protection of the solitude of the sisters—as Marys— when she writes: “The sisters are to keep silence. . . . The sisters may not speak at the parlor or at the grille without the permission of the abbess or her vicar” (RCI 5: 1, 5).

As I remember during my stay at Stamford, the abbess had to drive a sister to an appointment. She let me know this, as well as the time of her return, for our planned celebration of Eucharist. There was need to go forth, but the return was precise, for I sensed the sisters’ desire to reenter their rhythm of solitude. This or any appointment is insignificant to mention, other than the fact that the appointments took them away from the rhythm of their solitude; on their return I witnessed the desire to resume this rhythm, to return to God, to their Center. A woman also came for spiritual direction from one of the sisters. This was announced to all to make us aware of someone entering, which awareness assured all of the preservation of the rhythm of solitude.

9. And those ‘sons’ may not talk with anyone except with their ‘mothers’ and with the minister and his custodian when it pleases them to visit with the Lord’s blessing.

Francis provided a way for ministers to be in touch with the friars who were in hermitage for long periods of time. Having no means of communication such as those to which we are accustomed, Francis allowed the ministers to come and speak with the brothers. Other than this exception, the sons did not speak with others.

Clare says: “The sisters may not speak . . . without permission of the abbess or her vicar . . . [and] should speak very rarely at the grille. . . .” (RCI 5: 5, 9).

The Stamford Monastery, in comparison to some that I have seen, is small. Some people came to see the sisters or pray in their chapel or on their grounds. People would approach to speak with them. Words were briefly exchanged. I observed one sister on a bright, sunny day clearing leaves from a large flower bed. A man approached to speak. He pulled up a chair, sat and spoke. The sister, listening and making occasional responses, continued her clearing. I smiled to myself as I observed this scene. However, even with this intrusion, she preserved her Martha rhythm by continuing to work as she listened and responded. When he left, her silence surrounded her once again.

10. The 'sons,' however, may periodically assume the role of the 'mothers,' taking turns for a time as they have mutually decided. Let them strive to observe conscientiously and eagerly everything mentioned above.

From 2Cel 178 we know that the friars in Spain living in hermitage exchanged roles. We read: "In this way each week those who lead the active life exchange with those who live the contemplative life and the quiet of those giving themselves to contemplation is changed for the business of work."

Clare sees the role of abbess as that of "mother" (TestCI 19-20). Today, the role of abbess is very much taken up with the "business of work" for the sisters and the monastery itself. It seems as if the work load of the abbess, akin to that of the brothers and sisters of the First and Third Orders, makes her in her mother-role more a member of those branches while she is in office. And in the fourth chapter of her Rule Clare provides for the election of abbess as well as her council, exchanging roles with others in the community (RegCI IV.17-18).

In all monasteries today, the exchange of abbesses and their council—the Martha—takes place by election to terms of office, so these sisters are able to exchange this work role for a contemplative role within the rhythm of community solitude once again. As abbess and council, they worked to preserve this solitude. Now others are chosen to do the same, as once again, they enter the embrace of communal solitude.

In the Stamford Monastery, the sisters take every Friday as a quiet day, doing only necessary chores, with one sister completely free from all work. The sisters exchange roles every Friday to partake of "contemplation" while the other attends to the "business of work."

## Conclusion

In the early years, the Order was experienced more as a Franciscan movement rather than as the numerical divisions we live with today: First, Second, or Third Order. From the beginning, Francis spent time in caves, in solitude. Dacian Bluma, OFM, claims that Francis spent up to half of his converted life in hermitages. Clare joined the movement in these early years. Both of them valued solitude and contemplation. And while Francis preserved his experience for us in his "Rule for Hermitages," it seems that Clare picked up this same rhythm as she and her sisters lived as contemplatives in the solitude of San Damiano. And, in the list of quotes from Clare's writings handed to me at Bordentown, the Sister who wrote the list picked up the same rhythm in those writings as we shared an experience of the "Rule for Hermitages" together. This was verified for me during my stay at the Stamford Monastery. It seems that in regard to contemplation and solitude in the early Franciscan movement, there is much harmony between Francis and Clare.

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## Endnotes

This article was originally published in *The Cord* (July-August 1991): 195-202. It has been slightly re-edited for this publication.

"Rule for Hermitages," *Gospel Living* 62—63.