



## The Holy See

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***LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI  
TO THE BISHOP OF ASSISI-NOCERA UMBRA-GUALDO TADINO  
ON THE OCCASION OF THE "CLARIAN YEAR"***

*To my Venerable Brother  
DOMENICO SORRENTINO  
Bishop of Assisi-Nocera Umbra-Gualdo Tadino*

I learned with joy that in this diocese as well as among Franciscans and Poor Clares across the world, St Clare is being commemorated with a "Clarian Year" on the occasion of the eighth centenary of her "conversion" and consecration. This event, which can be dated between 1211 and 1212, completed "in the feminine", so to speak, the grace that the Assisi community had attained a few years earlier with the conversion of the son of Pietro di Bernardone. And, just as it had happened for Francis, Clare's decision also contained the hidden shoot of a new community, the Order of Poor Clares, which, having grown into a sturdy tree, in the cloister's fertile silence continues to scatter the good seed of the Gospel and to serve the cause of God's Kingdom.

This joyful occasion compels me to return to Assisi in spirit, to reflect on the meaning of that event with you, Venerable Brother, with the community entrusted to your care and, likewise, with the sons of St Francis and the daughters of St Clare. Indeed, the event also speaks to our generation and is particularly fascinating to young people. To them I turn my affectionate thoughts on the occasion of the [World Youth Day](#), celebrated this year in the particular Churches, in accordance with the custom, on this very day of Palm Sunday.

In her Testament the saint herself speaks of her radical choice of Christ in terms of "conversion" (cf. FF 2825). I would like to begin with this aspect, in a way taking up the theme of the [Discourse I gave on 17 June 2007](#) on Francis' conversion when I had the joy of visiting this diocese. The story of Clare's conversion revolves around the liturgical Feast of Palm Sunday.

Indeed her biographer writes: “The solemn day of the Palms was at hand when the young woman went to the man of God to ask him about her conversion and when and how she should act. Fr Francis ordered her to go among the crowds on the day of the Feast at the Palm Sunday celebration, dressed elegantly and adorned with jewels. Then, the following evening, to leave the town, to convert the worldly joy into the mourning of Passion Sunday. So it was that when the Sunday came, among the other ladies the young girl radiant with festive light entered the church with them. Here, with fitting foresight, it happened that while the others hurried to receive their palms, Clare, out of shyness, stood motionless; so the bishop came down the steps to her and placed the palm in her hands” (*Legenda Sanctae Clarae Virginis*, n. 7: FF 3168).

About six years had passed since the time when young Francis had set out on the path to holiness. He discovered his vocation in the words of the Crucifix in the Church of St Damian — “Go, Francis, repair my house” — and in the embrace of the lepers, the suffering face of Christ. It was this discovery that prompted his liberating gesture of “stripping himself”, in the presence of Bishop Guido.

In choosing between the idol of money, proposed by his earthly father, and the love of God that promised to fill his heart, he had no doubts and impulsively exclaimed: “From this moment I can say freely, ‘*Our Father, who art in heaven*’, not father Pietro di Bernardone” (*Vita Seconda*, 12: FF 597). Francis’ decision disconcerted the city and the first years of his new life were marked by hardship, bitterness and incomprehension. Yet many began to think.

Young Clare too, then in her teens, was moved by that witness. Endowed with a marked religious sense, she was won over by the existential “change” in direction taken by the man who had been a “king of feasts”. She found a way to meet him and let herself be caught up in his ardent love for Christ. The biographer portrays the young convert while he is instructing his new disciple: “Father Francis urged her to despise the world, showing her with lively words that hope directed to this world is arid and leads to disappointment, and instilling in her ears the sweet union with Christ” (*Vita Sanctae Clarae Virginis*, 5: FF 3164).

According to St Clare’s Testament, even before receiving his other companions Francis prophesied the way that would be taken by his first spiritual daughter and her sisters. Indeed while he was restoring the Church of St Damian, where the Crucifix had spoken to him, he proclaimed that women would live in this place who would glorify God by the holy tenor of their life (cf. FF 2826; cf. Tommaso da Celano, *Vita Seconda*, 13: FF 599).

The original Crucifix is now in the Basilica of St Clare. Christ’s large eyes which had fascinated Francis were to become Clare’s “mirror”. It is not by chance that the looking-glass would become a topic so dear to her that in her fourth letter to Agnes of Prague she would write: “Look into this mirror every day, O queen, spouse of Jesus Christ, and continually examine your face in it” (FF 2902).

In the years in which she met Francis to learn from him about the way of God, Clare was an attractive young woman. The “Poverello” of Assisi showed her a loftier beauty that cannot be measured by the mirror of vanity but develops in a life of authentic love, following in the footsteps of the Crucified Christ. God is the true beauty! Clare’s heart was lit up with this splendour and it gave her the courage to let her hair be cut and to embark on a life of penance.

For her, as for Francis, this decision was fraught with difficulty. Although some of her relatives understood her immediately — and Ortolana, her mother, and two of her sisters even followed her in the life she had chosen — others reacted violently. Her escape from home on the night between Palm Sunday and the Monday of Holy Week had something of an adventure about it. In the following days she was pursued to the places Francis had prepared for her but the attempts, even with force, to make her go back on her decision were in vain.

Clare had prepared herself for this struggle. Moreover although Francis was her guide, several clues hint that she also received fatherly support from Bishop Guido. This would explain the prelate’s gesture in offering the palm to her, as if to bless her courageous decision. Without the bishop’s support it would have been difficult for Clare to follow the plan that Francis had devised and that she put into practice, both in her consecration in the Church of the Porziuncola in the presence of Francis and his friars, and in the hospitality she received in the days that followed at the Monastery of San Paolo delle Abbadesse and at the community of Sant’Angelo in Panzo, prior to her definitive arrival at St Damian.

Clare’s story, like Francis’, thus has a specific ecclesial trait: an enlightened pastor and two children of the Church who entrust themselves to his discernment. In it institution and charism wondrously interact. Love and obedience to the Church, so marked in Franciscan-Clarissan spirituality, are rooted in this beautiful experience of the Christian community of Assisi, which not only gave birth to the faith of Francis and of his “little plant”, but also accompanied them, taking them by the hand on the path of holiness.

Francis saw clearly the reason for suggesting to Clare that she run away from home at the beginning of Holy Week. The whole of Christian life — hence also the life of special consecration — is a fruit of the Paschal Mystery and of participation in Christ’s death and Resurrection. The themes of sadness and glory, interwoven in the Palm Sunday liturgy, will be developed in the successive days through the darkness of the Passion to the light of Easter. With her decision Clare relives this mystery. She receives the programme for it, as it were, on Palm Sunday. She then enters the drama of the Passion, forfeiting her hair and, with it, renouncing her whole self in order to be a bride of Christ in humility and poverty. Francis and his companions are now her family.

Sisters were soon to come also from afar, but as in Francis’ case, the first new shoots were to sprout in Assisi. And Clare would always remain bound to her city, demonstrating her ties with it

especially in certain difficult circumstances when her prayers saved Assisi from violence and devastation. She said to her sisters at the time: “We have received many things from this city every day dear daughters; it would be quite wicked if we were not to do our utmost to help it now in this time of need” (cf. *Legenda Sanctae Clarae Virginis* 23: FF 3203).

The profound meaning of Clare’s “conversion” is a conversion to love. She was no longer to wear the fine clothes worn by the Assisi nobility but rather the elegance of a soul that expends itself in the praise of God and in the gift of self. In the small space of the Monastery of St Damian, at the school of Jesus, contemplated with spousal affection in the Eucharist, day by day the features developed of a community governed by love of God and by prayer, by caring for others and by service. In this context of profound faith and great humanity Clare became a sure interpreter of the Franciscan ideal, imploring the “privilege” of poverty, namely, the renunciation of goods, possessed even only as a community, which for a long time perplexed the Supreme Pontiff himself, even though, in the end, he surrendered to the heroism of her holiness.

How could one fail to hold up Clare, like Francis, to the youth of today? The time that separates us from the events of both these Saints has in no way diminished their magnetism. On the contrary, their timeliness in comparison with the illusions and delusions that all too often mark the condition of young people today. Never before has a time inspired so many dreams among the young, with the thousands of attractions of a life in which everything seems possible and licit.

Yet, how much discontent there is, how often does the pursuit of happiness and fulfilment end by unfolding paths that lead to artificial paradises, such as those of drugs and unrestrained sensuality!

The current situation with the difficulty of finding dignified employment and forming a happy and united family makes clouds loom on the horizon. However there are many young people, in our day too, who accept the invitation to entrust themselves to Christ and to face life’s journey with courage, responsibility and hope and even opt to leave everything to follow him in total service to him and to their brethren.

The story of Clare, with that of Francis, is an invitation to reflect on the meaning of life and to seek the secret of true joy in God. It is a concrete proof that those who do the Lord’s will and trust in him alone lose nothing; on the contrary they find the true treasure that can give meaning to all things.

I address this short reflection to you, Venerable Brother, to this Church that has the honour of having given birth to Francis and Clare, and the Poor Clares who every day live the beauty and fruitfulness of the contemplative life in support of the journey of the entire People of God, and to the Franciscans of the whole world, to all the young people who are seeking and in need of light, I offer this brief reflection. I hope it will contribute to an ever new discovery of these two figures who shine out in the firmament of the Church. With a special thought for the daughters of St Clare of

the first monastery, of the other monasteries of Assisi and throughout the world, I impart my heartfelt Apostolic blessing to all.

*From the Vatican, 1 April 2012, Palm Sunday*

**BENEDICTUS PP. XVI**

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