

THE TESTAMENT OF ST CLARE, 1247-1253

Of all the writings of Clare, the *Testament* is certainly the most autobiographical, filled as it is with personal and Franciscan remembrances that marvellously reveal the charism of Clare. Yet the document cannot be fully understood without seeing it in the light of Clare's struggle to have her *Rule*, her own interpretation of the *Form of Life*, left to her and the Poor Ladies by St Francis, approved by the Pope. No doubt she wrote this *Testament* as a statement of the essential values she perceived in the daily life of San Damiano. It was her farewell message, her 'last will' that would guide her sisters after her death.

¹In the name of the Lord! Amen.

²Among the other gifts we have received and do daily receive from our benefactor, *the Father of Mercies*, and for which we must express the deepest thanks to the glorious Father of Christ, ³there is our vocation, for which, all the more by way of its being more perfect and greater, do we owe the greatest thanks to him. ⁴Therefore the apostle [writes], *consider your own call*. ⁵The Son of God has been made for us *the way*, which our blessed father Francis, his true lover and imitator, has shown and taught us by word and example.

2Cor 1.3

1Cor 1.26

cf Jn 14.6

⁶Therefore, beloved sisters, we must consider the immense gifts that God has bestowed on us, ⁷especially those that he has seen fit to work in us through his beloved servant, our blessed father Francis, ⁸not only after our conversion but also while we were still [living among] the vanities of the world. ⁹In fact, almost immediately after his conversion, when he had neither brothers nor companions, ¹⁰while he was building the church of San Damiano, where he was totally visited by divine consolation and impelled to completely abandon the world, ¹¹through the great joy and enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, the holy man made a prophecy about us that the Lord later fulfilled.

¹²For at that time, climbing the wall of that church, he shouted in French to some poor people who were standing nearby: ¹³'Come and help me in the work [of building] the monastery of San Damiano, ¹⁴because ladies are yet to dwell here who will *give glory to our*

cf Matt 5.16 *heavenly Father*, throughout his holy, universal church by their celebrated and holy manner of life’.

¹⁵We can consider in this, therefore, the abundant kindness of God to us. ¹⁶Because of his mercy and love, he saw fit to speak these words through his saint about our *vocation and choice* through his saint.

cf 2Pt 1.10 ¹⁷And our most blessed father prophesied not only for us, but also for those who would come to this [same] holy vocation to which the Lord has called us.

¹⁸With what eagerness and fervour of mind and body, therefore, must we keep the commandments of our God and Father, so that, with the help of the Lord, we may return to him an increase of his *talent*. ¹⁹For the Lord himself has placed us not only as a form for others in being not only an example and mirror, but even for our sisters whom the Lord has called to our way of life as well, ²⁰that they in turn might be a mirror and example to those living in the world. ²¹Since the Lord has called us to such great things that those who are to be a mirror and example to others may be reflected in us, ²²we are greatly bound to bless and praise God and be all the more strengthened to do good in the Lord. ²³Therefore, if we live according to the form mentioned

cf 2Mac 6.28,31 above, we shall *leave* others a *noble example* and gain, with very little effort, *the prize* of eternal happiness.

cf Phil 3.14

²⁴After the most high heavenly Father saw fit in his mercy and grace to enlighten my heart, that I should do penance according to the example and teaching of our most blessed father Francis, ²⁵a short while after his conversion, I, together with a few sisters whom the Lord had given me after my conversion, willingly promised him obedience, ²⁶as the Lord gave us the light of his grace through his wonderful life and teaching. ²⁷When the blessed Francis saw, however, that, although we were physically weak and frail, we did not shirk deprivation, poverty, hard work, trial or the shame or contempt of the world – ²⁸rather, we considered them as great delights, as he had frequently examined us according to the example of the saints and his brothers – he greatly rejoiced in the Lord. ²⁹And moved by compassion for us, he bound himself, both through himself and through his Order, to always have the same loving care and special solicitude for us as for his own brothers.

³⁰And thus, by the will of God and our most blessed father Francis, we went to dwell in the church of San Damiano, ³¹where, in a little while, the Lord, through his mercy and grace, made our number increase so that he would fulfil what he had foretold through his

saint. ³²In fact, we had stayed in another place [before this], but only for a short while.

³³Afterwards he wrote a form of life for us, especially that we always persevere in holy poverty. ³⁴While he was living he was not content to encourage us with many words and examples to the love of holy poverty and its observance, but he gave us many writings that, after his death, we would in no way turn from it, ³⁵as the Son of God never wished to abandon this holy poverty while he lived in the world.

³⁶And our most blessed father Francis, having imitated his footprints, never departed either in example or in teaching from this holy poverty that he had chosen for himself and his brothers.

³⁷Therefore I, Clare, a handmaid of Christ and of the Poor Sisters of the monastery of San Damiano – although unworthy – and the little plant of the holy father, consider together with my sisters so lofty a profession and the command of such a father ³⁸and also the frailty of some others that we feared in ourselves after the passing of our holy father Francis, who was our pillar [of strength] and, after God, our one consolation and support. ³⁹Time and again we willingly bound ourselves to our Lady, most holy Poverty, that after my death, the sisters, those present and those to come, would never turn away from her.

⁴⁰And as I have always been more zealous and solicitous to observe and to have others observe the holy poverty that we have promised to the Lord and our holy father Francis, ⁴¹so, too, the others who will succeed me in office should be always bound to observe holy poverty with the help of God and have it observed by the other sisters.

⁴²Moreover, for greater security, I took care to have our profession of the most holy poverty that we promised our father strengthened with privileges by the Lord Pope Innocent, during whose pontificate we had our beginning, and by his other successors, ⁴³that we would never not in any way turn away from her.

⁴⁴For this reason, on bended knees and bowing low with both [body and soul], I commend all my sisters, both those present and those to come, the holy mother the Roman Church, the supreme Pontiff, and, especially the Lord Cardinal who has been appointed for the Order of Friars Minor and for us, ⁴⁵that out of love of the God who was placed poor in the crib, lived poor in the world, and remained naked on the cross, ⁴⁶[our Protector] may always see to it that his *little flock*, which the Lord has begotten in his holy church by the word and example of our blessed father Francis by following the poverty and humility of

cf Lk 12.32

his beloved Son and his glorious Virgin Mother, ⁴⁷observe the holy poverty that we have promised God and our most blessed father Saint Francis. May he always encourage and support them in these things.

⁴⁸And as the Lord gave us our most blessed father Francis as a founder, planter, and helper in the service of Christ and in those things we have promised to God and to our blessed father, ⁴⁹who while he was living was always solicitous in word and in deed to cherish and take care of us, his plant, ⁵⁰so I commend and leave my sisters, both those present and those to come, to the successor of our blessed father Francis and to the entire Order, ⁵¹that they may always help us to progress in serving God more perfectly and, above all, to observe more perfectly most holy poverty.

⁵²If the sisters spoken of ever leave and go elsewhere, let them be bound, after my death, wherever they may be, to observe the same form of poverty that we have promised God and our most blessed father Francis.

⁵³Nevertheless, let both [the sister] who is in office, as well as the other sisters, exercise such care and farsightedness that they do not acquire or receive more land about the place than extreme necessity requires for a vegetable garden. ⁵⁴But 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 extreme necessity demands. ⁵⁵This land should not be cultivated or planted but remain always untouched and undeveloped.

⁵⁶In the Lord Jesus Christ, I admonish and exhort all my sisters, both those present and those to come, to strive always to imitate the way of holy simplicity, humility and poverty and [to preserve] the integrity of our holy way of living, ⁵⁷as we were taught from the beginning of our conversion by Christ and our blessed father Francis.

*2Cor 1.3
cf 2Cor 2.14*

⁵⁸May the *Father of mercies* always *spread the fragrance* of a good name from them, both among those who are far away as well as those who are near, not by any merits of ours but by the sole mercy and grace of his goodness. ⁵⁹And loving one another with the charity of Christ, may the love you have given in your hearts be shown outwardly in your deeds ⁶⁰so that, compelled by such an example, the sisters may always grow in love of God and in charity for one another.

⁶¹I also beg that [sister] who will be in an office of the sisters to strive to exceed the others more by her virtues and holy life than by her office, ⁶²so that, stimulated by her example, they obey her not so

much because of her office as because of love. ⁶³Let her also be discerning and attentive to her sisters as a good mother to her daughters, ⁶⁴and let her take care especially to provide for them according to the needs of each one out of the alms that the Lord shall give. ⁶⁵Let her also be so kind and available that they may safely reveal their needs ⁶⁶and confidently have recourse to her at any hour, as they see fit both for themselves and their sisters.

⁶⁷Let the sisters who are subjects, however, keep in mind that they have given up their own wills for the sake of the Lord. ⁶⁸Therefore I want them to obey their mother of their own free will as they have promised the Lord, ⁶⁹so that, seeing the charity, humility and unity they have toward one another, their mother might bear all the burdens of her office more easily, ⁷⁰and, through their way of life, what is painful and bitter might be changed into sweetness.

⁷¹And because *the way and path is difficult and the gate* through which one passes and enters *to life is narrow, there are both few who walk it and enter through it.* ⁷²And if there are some who walk that way for a while, there are very few who persevere on it. ⁷³But how blessed are those to whom it has been given *to walk that way and endure to the end.*

cf Mat 7.14

cf Ps 119.1

cf Mat 10.22

⁷⁴Let us be very careful, therefore, that, if we have set out on the path of the Lord, we do not at any time turn away from it through our own fault or negligence or ignorance, ⁷⁵nor that we offend so great a Lord and his Virgin Mother, and our blessed father Francis, the church triumphant and even the church militant. ⁷⁶For it is written: *you rebuke the insolent, accursed ones, who wander from your commandments.*

Ps 119.21

cf Eph 3.14

⁷⁷For this reason *I bow my knees before the Father* of our Lord Jesus Christ that, through the supporting merits of the glorious holy Virgin Mary, his mother, and our most blessed father Francis and all the saints, ⁷⁸the Lord himself, who has given a good beginning, will also give the increase and *completion.* Amen.

cf 2Cor 8.6, 11

⁷⁹So that it may be better observed, I leave you this writing, my very dear and beloved sisters, those present and those to come, as a sign of the blessing of the Lord and of our most blessed father Francis and of my blessing, your mother and servant.