

THE FORM OF LIFE OF CLARE OF ASSISI, 1253

The last years of Clare's life were characterised by her struggle to have her vision of religious life approved by the Church. Her insistence on her own Form of Life no doubt came from years of attempting to live the vision Francis inspired in her within the limits of the earlier Rules, imposed as they were by men who did not comprehend the uniqueness of her vision. It is remarkable that Clare became the first woman to write a religious Rule and, in so doing, inaugurated a totally new epoch for women in the life of the Church.

The Community of St Francis lived by this Rule, omitting the sections referring to enclosure, and with minimal modification to reflect the different context of Church order, from its foundation in 1905 until 1963.

[CHAPTER 1]

In the Name of the Lord Begins the Form of Life of the Poor Sisters

¹The form of life of the Order of the Poor Sisters that Blessed Francis established, is this: ²to observe the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, by living in obedience, without anything of one's own, and in chastity.

³Clare, the unworthy servant of Christ and the little plant of the most blessed Francis, promises obedience and reverence to the Lord Pope Innocent and to his canonically elected successors, and to the Roman Church. ⁴And as, at the beginning of her conversion she, together with her sisters promised obedience to blessed Francis, so now she promises his successors to observe the same obedience inviolably.

⁵And the other sisters shall always be obliged to obey the successors of the blessed Francis and Sister Clare and the other canonically elected Abbesses who succeed her.

[CHAPTER 2]

Those Who Wish to Accept this Life and How They Are to Be Received

¹If, by divine inspiration, anyone should come to us with the desire to accept this life, the Abbess is bound to seek the consent of all the

sisters; ²and if the majority shall have agreed, having had the permission of our Lord Cardinal Protector, she can receive her. ³If she sees that [the candidate] is acceptable, let [the Abbess] diligently examine her or have her examined concerning the Catholic faith and the sacraments of the Church. ⁴And if she believes all these things and is willing to profess them faithfully and to observe them steadfastly to the end; ⁵and if she has no husband, or if she has [a husband] who has already entered religious life with the authority of the Bishop of the diocese and has already made a vow of continence; and if there is no impediment to her observance of this life, such as advanced age or ill-health or mental weakness, ⁶let the tenor of our life be clearly explained to her.

cf Mt 19.21 ⁷If she is suitable, let the words of the holy Gospel be addressed to her: that she should go and sell all that she has and take care to distribute the proceeds to the poor. ⁸If she cannot do this, her good will shall suffice. ⁹Let the Abbess and the sisters take care not to be concerned about her temporal affairs, so that she may freely dispose of her possessions as the Lord may inspire her. ¹⁰However, if some counsel is required, let them send her to some discerning and God-fearing men, according to whose advice her goods may be distributed to the poor.

¹¹After her hair has been cut off round her head and her secular clothes have been set aside, she may be permitted three tunics and a mantle. ¹²Thereafter, she may not go outside the monastery except for a useful, reasonable, evident and approved purpose. ¹³When the year of probation is ended, let her be received into obedience, promising to observe perpetually our life and form of poverty.

¹⁴Let no one receive the veil during the period of probation. ¹⁵The sisters may also have little mantles for convenience and propriety in serving and working. ¹⁶In fact, let the Abbess, with discernment, provide them with clothing according to the diversity of persons, places, seasons and cold climates, as it shall seem expedient to her by necessity.

¹⁷Young girls who are received into the monastery before the age established by law may have their hair cut round [their heads]; and, after they have put aside their secular clothes, they may be clothed in a religious garb, as the Abbess sees fit. ¹⁸However, when they reach the age required by law, let them make their profession clothed in the same way as the others. ¹⁹The Abbess shall carefully provide a Mistress from among the more discerning sisters of the monastery

both for these and the other novices.²⁰She shall diligently form them in a holy way of life and proper behaviour according to the form of our profession.

²¹Let the same form described above be observed in the examination and reception of the sisters who serve outside the monastery. ²²These sisters may wear shoes. ²³No one may live with us in the monastery unless she has been received according to the form of our profession.

²⁴And for love of the most holy and beloved Child who was wrapped *cf. Lk 2.7-12* in such poor little swaddling clothes and laid in a manger and of his most holy Mother, I admonish, beg and exhort my sisters always to wear poor garments.

[CHAPTER 3]

**The Divine Office and Fasting,
Confession and Communion**

¹Let the sisters who can read celebrate the Divine Office according to the custom of the Friars Minor. ²For this [reason] they may have breviaries, reading them without singing. ³Those who, for some reasonable cause, are at times unable to recite their hours by reading them, may, like the other sisters say the *Our Father's*.

⁴Let those who do not know how to read say twenty-four *Our Father's* for Matins; five for Lauds; seven for each of the hours of Prime, Terce, Sext and None; twelve, however, for Vespers; seven for Compline.

⁵For the deceased, let them also say seven *Our Father's* with the *Requiem aeternam* at Vespers; twelve for Matins: ⁶whereas the sisters who can read are obliged to recite the *Office of the Dead*. ⁷When a sister of our monastery shall have departed this life, however, let them say fifty *Our Father's*.

⁸Let the sisters fast at all times. ⁹They may eat twice on Christmas, however, no matter on what day it happens to fall. ¹⁰The younger sisters, those who are weak, and those who are serving outside the monastery may be mercifully dispensed as the Abbess sees fit. ¹¹In time of manifest necessity, however, let the sisters not be bound to corporal fasting.

¹²With the permission of the Abbess, the sisters may confess at least twelve times a year. ¹³Let them be careful not to introduce other talk unless it pertains to the confession and the salvation of souls. ¹⁴Let them receive Communion seven times [a year], that is, on Christmas, Thursday of Holy Week, Easter, Pentecost, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, the feast of Saint Francis, and the Feast of All Saints.

¹⁵The Chaplain may celebrate within [the enclosure] in order to give Communion to the sisters who are in good health or to those who are ill.

[CHAPTER 4]

**The Election and Office of the Abbess:
The Chapter, and the Officials and the Discreets**

¹The sisters are bound to observe the canonical form in the election of the Abbess. ²Let them quickly arrange to have the Minister General or the Minister Provincial of the Order of Friars Minor present. ³Let him dispose them, through the Word of God, to perfect harmony and to the common good in the election that is to be held. ⁴Let no one be elected who is not professed. ⁵And if a non-professed is elected or given to them in another way, she may not be obeyed unless she first professes our form of poverty.

⁶At her death let the election of another Abbess take place. ⁷If at any time it should appear to the entire body of sisters that she is not competent for their service and common welfare, the sisters are bound as quickly as possible to elect another as Abbess and mother according to the form described above.

⁸Let whoever is elected reflect upon the kind of burden she has undertaken and to whom she must render an account of the flock committed to her. ⁹Let her strive to preside as well over the others more by her virtues and holy behaviour than by her office, so that, moved by her example, the sisters may obey her more out of love than out of fear. ¹⁰Let her avoid exclusive loves, lest by loving some more than others she cause scandal among all.

¹¹Let her console those who are afflicted. ¹²Let her also be the last refuge for those who are troubled, lest, should they fail to find in her the remedies for health, the sickness of despair might overcome the weak.

¹³Let her preserve common life in everything, especially in whatever pertains to the church, the dormitory, refectory, infirmary, and clothing. ¹⁴Her Vicaress is bound to preserve it in the same way.

¹⁵The Abbess is bound to call her sisters together at least once a week in the Chapter, ¹⁶where both she and her sisters should humbly confess their common and public offences and negligences. ¹⁷Let her consult with all her sisters there regarding whatever concerns the welfare and integrity of the monastery, ¹⁸for the Lord frequently reveals what is best to the least [among us].

¹⁹No heavy debt may be incurred except with the common consent of the sisters and by reason of manifest necessity, and let this be done through a procurator. ²⁰Let the Abbess and her sisters, however, be careful that nothing is deposited in the monastery for safekeeping; ²¹for such practices often give rise to troubles and scandals.

²²Let all who hold offices in the monastery be chosen by the common consent of all the sisters to preserve the unity of mutual love and peace. ²³In the same way, let at least eight sisters be elected from the more discerning whose counsel the Abbess should be always bound to use in those matters which our form of life demands. ²⁴Moreover, the sisters can and should, if it seems useful and expedient, remove the officials and discreets and choose others in their place.

[CHAPTER 5]

Silence, the Parlour, and the Grille

¹Let the sisters keep silence from the hour of Compline until Terce, except those who are serving outside the monastery. ²Let them also continually be silent in the church, the dormitory, and the refectory, only while they are eating. ³At all times, however, they may be permitted to speak with discernment in the infirmary for the recreation and service of the sick. ⁴Nevertheless, they may communicate whatever is necessary always and everywhere, briefly and in a low tone of voice.

⁵The sisters may not be permitted to speak in the parlour or at the grille without the permission of the Abbess or her Vicaress. ⁶Let those who have permission not dare to speak in the parlour unless they are in the presence and hearing of two sisters. ⁷Moreover, let them not presume to go to the grille, unless there are at least three sisters present [who have been] appointed by the Abbess or her Vicaress from the eight discreets who were elected by all the sisters for the council of the Abbess. ⁸Let the Abbess and her Vicaress be themselves bound to observe this form of speaking ⁹and this very rarely at the grille and, by all means, never at the door.

¹⁰Let a curtain be hung inside the grille which may not be removed except when the Word of God is preached or when a sister is speaking with someone. ¹¹Let the grille have a wooden door which is well provided with two distinct iron locks, bolts and bars, ¹²so that, it can be locked, especially at night, by two keys, one of which the Abbess may keep and the other the sacristan. ¹³Let it always be locked except when the Divine Office is being celebrated and for the

reasons given above. ¹⁴Under no circumstance whatever, may a sister speak to anyone at the grille before sunrise or after sunset. ¹⁵Let there always be a curtain on the inside of the parlour, which may not be removed.

¹⁶No one may speak in the parlour during the Lent of Saint Martin and the Greater Lent, ¹⁷except to a priest for confession or for some other manifest necessity, which is left to the prudence of the Abbess or her Vicaress.

[CHAPTER 6]

The Lack of Possessions

¹After the Most High Heavenly Father saw fit by his grace to enlighten my heart to do penance according to the example and teaching of our most blessed Father, Saint Francis, I, together with my sisters, willingly promised him obedience shortly after his own conversion.

²When the blessed Father saw we had no fear of poverty, hard work, trial, shame, or contempt of the world, but, instead, regarded such things as great delights, moved by compassion he wrote a form of life for us as follows:

³"Because by divine inspiration you have made yourselves daughters and servants of the Most High King, the heavenly Father, and have espoused yourselves to the Holy Spirit, choosing to live according to the perfection of the holy Gospel, ⁴I resolve and promise for myself and for my brothers to always have that same loving care and solicitude for you as [I have] for them."

⁵As long as he lived he diligently fulfilled this and wished that it always be fulfilled by his brothers.

⁶Shortly before his death he once more wrote his last will for us that we or those, as well, who would come after us would never turn aside from the holy poverty we had embraced. He said:

⁷"I, little brother Francis, wish to follow the life and poverty of our most high Lord Jesus Christ and of his holy Mother and to persevere in this until the end; ⁸and I ask and counsel you, my ladies, to live always in this most holy life and poverty. ⁹And keep most careful watch that you never depart from this by reason of the teaching or advice of anyone."

¹⁰As I, together with my sisters, have ever been solicitous to

safeguard the holy poverty which we have promised the Lord God and blessed Francis, ¹¹so, too, the Abbesses who shall succeed me in office and all the sisters are bound to observe it inviolably to the end: ¹²that is, by not receiving or having possession or ownership either of themselves or through an intermediary, ¹³or even anything that might reasonably be called property, ¹⁴except as much land as necessity requires for the integrity and proper seclusion of the monastery, ¹⁵and this land may not be cultivated except as a garden for the needs of the sisters.

[CHAPTER 7]

The Manner of Working

¹Let the sisters to whom the Lord has given the grace of working work faithfully and devotedly after the Hour of Terce at work that pertains to a virtuous life and the common good. ²[Let them do this] in such a way that, while they banish idleness, the enemy of the soul, they do not extinguish the spirit of holy prayer and devotion to which all other things of our earthly existence must contribute.

³At the Chapter, in the presence of all, the Abbess or her Vicaress is bound to assign the work that each should perform with her hands. ⁴Let the same be done if alms have been sent by some [benefactors] for the needs of the sisters, so that, in common, a recommendation may be made for them. ⁵All such [alms] may be distributed for the common good by the Abbess or her Vicaress with the advice of the discreet.

[CHAPTER 8]

**The Sisters Shall not Acquire Anything as Their Own;
Begging Alms; The Sick Sisters**

¹Let the sisters not appropriate anything, neither a house nor a place nor anything at all; ²instead, as pilgrims and strangers in this world who serve the Lord in poverty and humility, let them confidently send for alms. ³Nor should they be ashamed, since the Lord made himself poor in this world for us. ⁴This is that summit of the highest poverty which has established you, my dearest sisters, heiresses and queens of the kingdom of heaven; it has made you poor in the things [of this world] but exalted you in virtue. ⁵Let this be your portion which leads into the land of the living. ⁶Clinging totally to this, my most beloved sisters, for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and his most holy Mother, do not ever wish to have anything else under heaven.

cf. Ps 142.5

⁷Let no sister be permitted to send letters or to receive or give away anything outside the monastery without the permission of the Abbess.

⁸Let it not be permitted to have anything that the Abbess has not given or permitted. ⁹Should anything be sent to a sister by her relatives or others, let the Abbess give it to the sister. ¹⁰If the sister needs it, the sister may use it; otherwise, let her give it lovingly to a sister who does need it. ¹¹If, however, money is sent to her, the Abbess, with the advice of the discreets, may provide for the needs of the sister.

¹²As for the sick sisters, let the Abbess be strictly bound to inquire with diligence, by herself and through other sisters, what their illness requires both by way of counsel as well as food and other necessities, ¹³and let her provide for them charitably and kindly according to the resources of the place. ¹⁴Because everyone is bound to serve and provide for their sisters who are ill, let them do this as they would wish to be served if they were suffering from some illness. ¹⁵Let each one confidently manifest her needs to the other. ¹⁶For as a mother loves and cherishes her child according to the flesh, how much more diligently should a sister love and cherish her sister according to the Spirit.

¹⁷Those who are ill may lie on sacks filled with straw and may use feather pillows for their head; ¹⁸those who need woollen stockings and quilts may use them.

¹⁹When the sick sisters are visited by those who enter the monastery, they may answer them with brevity, each responding with some good words to those who speak to them. ²⁰But the other sisters who have permission may not dare to speak to those who enter the monastery unless in the presence and hearing of the two sister discreets assigned by the Abbess or her Vicaress. ²¹Let the Abbess and her Vicaress, as well, be bound to observe this manner of speaking.

[CHAPTER 9]

**The Penance to be Imposed on the Sisters Who Sin;
The Sisters Who Serve Outside the Monastery**

¹If any sister, at the instigation of the enemy, has sinned mortally against the form of our profession, ²and, if after having been admonished two or three times by the Abbess or other sisters, she does not amend, let her eat bread and water on the floor before all the sisters in the refectory for as many days as she shall have been obstinate. ³If it seems advisable to the Abbess, let her be subjected to

even greater punishment. ⁴Meanwhile, as long as she remains obstinate, let them pray that the Lord will enlighten her heart to do penance. ⁵The Abbess and her sisters, however, must beware not to become angry or disturbed on account of any one's sin, for anger and disturbance prevent charity in oneself and in others.

⁶If it should happen may it never be so that an occasion of trouble or scandal should arise between sister and sister through a word or gesture, ⁷let she who was the cause of the trouble, before offering her gift of prayer to the Lord, not only prostrate herself humbly at once at the feet of the other and ask pardon, ⁸but also beg her with simplicity to intercede for her to the Lord that he might forgive her. ⁹Let the other sister, mindful of that word of the Lord, "If you do not forgive

cf Mt 18.35

cf. Mt 6.15

from the heart, neither will your heavenly Father forgive you",

¹⁰generously pardon her sister every wrong she has done her.

¹¹The sisters who serve outside the monastery may not linger outside unless some manifest necessity requires it. ¹²Let them conduct themselves virtuously and say little, so that those who see them may always be edified. ¹³Let them strictly beware of having suspicious meetings and dealings with others. ¹⁴They may not be godmothers of men or women lest gossip or trouble arise because of this. ¹⁵Let them not presume to repeat the gossip of the world inside the monastery. ¹⁶And let them be strictly bound not to repeat outside the monastery anything that was said or done within which could cause scandal.

¹⁷If anyone should innocently offend in these two matters, let it be left to the prudence of the Abbess to mercifully impose a penance on her.

¹⁸But if a sister does this through a vicious habit, the Abbess, with the advice of her discreet, may impose a penance on her according to the nature of the fault.

[CHAPTER 10]

The Admonition and Correction of the Sisters

¹Let the Abbess admonish and visit her sisters, and humbly and charitably correct them, not commanding them anything that is against their soul and the form of our profession. ²Let the sisters, however, who are subjects, remember that they have renounced their wills for God's sake. ³Therefore let them be firmly bound to obey their Abbess in all the things they have promised the Lord to observe and which are not against their soul and our profession.

⁴Let the Abbess, on her part, be so familiar with them that they can speak and act with her as ladies do with their servant. ⁵For this is the

way it must be: the Abbess should be the servant of all the sisters.

⁶In fact, I admonish and exhort the sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ to beware of all pride, vainglory, envy, avarice, care and anxiety about this world, detraction and murmuring, dissension and division. ⁷Let them be always eager to preserve among themselves the unity of mutual love which is the bond of perfection.

⁸Let those who do not know how to read not be eager to learn. ⁹Let them direct their attention to what they should desire to have above all else: the Spirit of the Lord and its holy activity, ¹⁰to pray always to him with a pure heart, and to have humility, patience in difficulty and infirmity, ¹¹and to love those who persecute, blame, and accuse us, ¹²for the Lord says: *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* ¹³*But the one who endures to the end will be saved.*

Mt 5.10

Mt 10.22

[CHAPTER 11]

The Custody of the Enclosure

¹Let the portress be mature in her manner of acting, discerning, and of a suitable age. Let her remain in an open cell without a door during the day. ²A suitable companion may be assigned to her who may take her place in everything whenever necessary.

³Let the door be well secured by two different iron locks, with bars and bolts, ⁴so that, especially at night, it may be locked with two keys, one of which the portress may have, the other the Abbess. ⁵Let it never be left without a guard and securely locked with one key.

⁶Let them most diligently take care to see that the door is never left open, except when this can hardly be conveniently avoided. ⁷Let it never be opened to anyone who wishes to enter, except those who have been given permission by the Supreme Pontiff or our Lord Cardinal. ⁸The sisters may not allow anyone to enter the monastery before sunrise or to remain within after sunset, unless a manifest, reasonable, an unavoidable cause demands otherwise.

⁹If a bishop has permission to offer Mass within the enclosure, either for the blessing of an Abbess or for the consecration of one of the sisters as a nun or for any other reason, let him be satisfied with both few and virtuous companions and assistants as possible.

¹⁰Whenever it is necessary for other men to enter the monastery to do some work, let the Abbess carefully post a suitable person at the door, ¹¹who may only open it to those assigned for work and to no one else.

¹²Let the sisters be extremely careful at such times not to be seen by those who enter.

[CHAPTER 12]

The Visitator, the Chaplain and the Cardinal Protector

¹Let the Visitator always be taken from the Order of the Friars Minor according to the will and command of our Cardinal. ²Let him be the kind of person who is well known for his integrity and good manner of living. ³His duty shall be to correct any excesses against the form of our profession, whether these be in head or in the members. ⁴Taking his stand in a public place, that he can be seen by others, let him speak with several and with each one concerning the matters that pertain to the duty of the visitation as he sees best.

⁵We ask as a favour of the same Order a chaplain and a clerical companion of good reputation, of prudent discretion and two lay brothers, lovers of a holy and upright way of live, ⁶in support of our poverty, as we have always mercifully had from the aforesaid Order of Friars Minor, ⁷in light of the love of God and our blessed Francis.

⁸Let the chaplain not be permitted to enter the monastery without a companion. ⁹When they enter, let them remain in an open place, in such a way that they can always see each other and be seen by others. ¹⁰They may enter the monastery for the confession of the sick who cannot go to the parlour, for their Communion, for the Last Anointing and the Prayers of the Dying.

¹¹Suitable and sufficient outsiders may enter, moreover, according to the prudence of the Abbess, for funeral services, for the solemnity of Masses for the Dead, for digging or opening a grave, or also for making arrangements for it.

¹²Let the sisters be strictly bound to always have that Cardinal of the holy Roman Church who has been delegated by the Lord Pope for the Friars Minor as Governor, Protector and Corrector, ¹³that, always submissive and subject at the feet of that holy Church and steadfast in the Catholic faith, we may always observe the poverty and humility of our Lord Jesus Christ and of his most holy Mother and the holy Gospel we have firmly promised. Amen.