

The Feast of St. Clare: Radical Poverty

Homily - Reverend Robert Gillelan

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What were you doing at the age of 18? At the age of 18, Clare was running away from her family's wealth.

Hear that? She was running away from wealth.

She was also running away from marriage. And what was she running to?

Well, she was running to what she would later call the “privilege of poverty” and a marriage to following Christ in a very, very rapid way. So she was born around 1193.

And 18 years later, in the year 1212-1213, she ran away from home. It was quite dramatic.

She ran away because she had heard the preaching of St. Francis.

She was very much attracted to his radical way of following Christ. And so, Palm Sunday night in the year 1212, she ran away from home, under the cover of darkness.

In cahoots with St. Francis and some of his brothers, she ran to them.

Francis cut off her hair and gave her a primitive habit. And then sent her to Dominican nuns to take care of her until he could figure

out what to do.

And, of course, from that, Saint Clare became the foundress of the Poor Clares, a division of the Franciscans. And she remained the head of the Poor Clares for 40 years until her death around 1254.

It's quite remarkable that someone so young could be so attracted to this message of Christ and His poverty and His humility. And she was.

She actually wanted to become a Franciscan and follow Francis, but she couldn't do that because she was a woman. So, eventually, even though her family was opposed to her choice, you know, to reject wealth and the inheritance and to become this nun.

And at the height of the convent's life, she had attracted about 50 other followers in her lifetime to embrace this life of contemplative prayer and communal prayer.

They grew their vegetables.

They didn't eat meat. They did crafting and things like that.

They were very much committed in the work that they ordered.

And one of the hallmarks of the Poor Clares was that they embraced this view of radical poverty so much so that, for example, if you were a wealthy widow and wanted to join the group to become one of these nuns, and you said, look, I've got half a million dollars for my inheritance. Let me donate that to the convent. Clare said no. We're not going to do it.

She kept insisting on this radical view of poverty that the nuns could not own anything personally, nor with the monastery. And so even the folks who were watching this development said, you know, you've got to have something for a rainy day. So go ahead and, you know, put it in the name of the monastery so that you have some security. And she kept saying no.

And in the end, by the way, she is the first woman to write the rule for a group of women religious. So Clare was a pioneer for writing the rules specifically for her nuns, included this radical view of poverty and humility.

It is said that they didn't have beds, that they slept on the ground, on the floor. They begged for their food.

It was very egalitarian in terms of duties. All the nuns did all the jobs, and even Clare, it is said, would wash the feet of the nuns who went out and begged for food.

When they came back, Clare went down on her knees and washed the feet of the nuns who returned with the food. So in her own way, in this cloistered contemplative way, she followed Christ as closely as she could, according to the example of St. Francis.

And when we ask ourselves, you know, what good is the contemplative life today? Well, today there are probably about 20,000 Poor Clares around the world.

And there is a Poor Clare monastery two hours from here in Langhorne, Pennsylvania, which is just north of Philly.

You know, what does that do for the world?
Isn't it just escaping? No.

Prayer, contemplative prayer of all of these contemplative orders benefits all of us.

And I think nowadays one of the most important things that it does is that it breaks the hyper-connectivity that all of us have to deal with.

We are in a way hyper connected to everyone and everything because of our cell phones. We are connected to our spouses, to our families, our friends, our relatives, our work.

We are connected to the entire world when we go online or on social media. Not so for contemplative orders.

They are connected in two ways, first primarily to God, and secondly to the family of the community. There is a vertical and a very limited horizontal connectivity.

In this way, their love that serves the Lord is very, very intentionally.

Today we celebrate the feast day of young woman, let us pray through her intercession that through our intercession, that she will help us also to embrace these truths of spiritual poverty and radical humility, so that we may come to know the Lord more intimately, to love Him more deeply, and to serve Him more faithfully.

This homily has been transcribed from the audio recording and formatted for readability. Every effort has been made to preserve Father Gillelan's words faithfully. Minor punctuation, capitalization, and obvious transcription corrections have been made for clarity.