

Pilgrimage 2025

**In the steps of St Francis &
St Clare of Assisi**



Food for the Journey

Timeline of St Francis & St Clare

1181/82 – Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone is born and baptised in Assisi. Later, at the insistence of his father who was in France when he was born, Giovanni is renamed Francesco.

1190 – Francis attends the parish school at the Church of San Giorgio (now the site of the Basilica of San Chiara).

1193/94 – Chiara di Favarone (Clare) is born to an aristocratic Assisian family. Her family home was adjacent to the present Cathedral of San Rufino.

1198-1205 – during a period of civil unrest in which Assisians fight to gain independence from papal and imperial power, Clare's family takes refuge in Perugia.

1202 – Francis fights in a battle between Assisi and Perugia, is captured and imprisoned in Perugia.

1203 – Francis's father pays a ransom for Francis's return from Perugia. Francis endures a long period of depression and illness.

1204 – Francis sets out to fulfil his lifelong ambition to become a knight. He returns to Assisi after receiving a vision which directs him to return home to seek God's will. A gradual period of conversion begins.

1205 – Francis gives generously to the poor and experiences a life-changing encounter with a leper. He seeks solitude with God in caves and abandoned churches. While contemplating the Byzantine cross in the church of San Damiano, Francis hears God's voice: 'Go, repair my house which, as you see, is falling completely to ruin.' Taking the injunction literally, Francis sells cloth from his father's shop and gives money to the local priest to repair the church building.

1206 – Francis's father takes Francis before the Bishop of Assisi, demanding repayment for his stolen cloth. Francis strips, returning his clothes and renouncing his father and his inheritance. He spends time with the Spadalonga family in Gubbio before returning to Assisi. He nurses lepers and begs for stones to repair three small churches near Assisi including San Damiano and the Porziuncola.

1208 – Francis desires to imitate Jesus perfectly. He begins to preach repentance and peace and several young men from Assisi leave their families and possessions to join him at Rivotorto.

1208/9 – Francis visits Poggio Bustone in the Rieti Valley and is assured that his sins have been forgiven and that his new community of Christ imitators will be blessed.

1209 – Francis writes a rule for his new order. He and his companions go to Rome and gain approval for the rule from Pope Honorius III. They are forced to leave Rivotorto and settle at the Porziuncola (Santa Maria degli Angeli).

1210 – Clare hears Francis preach in the Church of San Giorgio

1211 – Francis spends the 40 days of Lent on Isola Maggiore in Lake Trasimeno. Later in the year he tries to reach Muslim territory in order to convert Muslims to Christianity but his voyage is unsuccessful.

1212 – Clare receives her Palm Sunday palm from Bishop Guido and that evening escapes through the ‘death door’ of her family home and runs away to Francis and the brothers at the Porziuncola. She makes her profession to Francis and is taken to a nearby Benedictine convent in the next town, and later to a second convent on the slopes of Mount Subasio. Three weeks after Clare’s escape she is joined by her sister Catherine (Agnes). Clare and the newly formed Poor Ladies are cloistered in San Damiano.

1213 – Francis is gifted La Verna, a mountain sanctuary in the Tuscan Valley.

1214 – Francis may have completed the Camino to Santiago or attempted to visit Muslim communities in Spain but is forced to turn back because of ill-health.

1215 – Francis gives a ‘Form of Life’ to Clare and her companions. He persuades Clare to become Abbess of the Poor Ladies.

1217 – The first Franciscan Chapter is held at the Porziuncola with over 500 friars in attendance.

1218-19 – Clare and the sisters receive the Constitutions of Cardinal Ugolino (later Pope Gregory IX), along with the Rule of St Benedict.

1219 – Following the martyrdom of Franciscan missionaries to Morocco, Francis sails to the Holy Land and in Egypt meets with the Muslim Sultan.

1220 – A very ill Francis visits Venice, Bologna and Orvieto on his return from Egypt.

1220 – Francis tames the wolf of Gubbio.

1221 – Francis writes a letter that becomes the basic rule of the Third Order (a lay order for Franciscan men and women) and begins to create a more formal rule for the First Order.

1223 – At Fonte Colombo in the Rieti Valley Francis completes the final revision of the Rule which is approved by Pope Honorius III. Exhausted and ill, Francis travels to Greccio where he re-enacts the Christmas story using local farm animals.

1224 – Francis returns to La Verna to pray and fast. He receives the stigmata, the marks of Christ's wounds.

1224 – The beginning of Clare's sickness.

1225 – The miracle of the grapes at La Foresta in the Rieti Valley. Nearly blind and suffering possibly from tuberculoid leprosy, Francis returns to San Damiano where Clare and the sisters care for him. He begins to write the Canticle of the Creatures. In the late summer he is taken to Fonte Colombo where he has his eyes cauterised.

1226 – Clare's mother Ortolana enters San Damiano following the death of her husband.

1226 – Francis composes the final verse of the Canticle of the Creatures about 'Sister Death'. He asks to be taken back to the Porziuncola and on the way to lower Assisi, he turns and blesses upper Assisi. He dies on October 3 at the Porziuncola and is buried at the Church of San Giorgio.

1227 – Cardinal Ugolino becomes Pope Gregory IX. He seeks to release Clare from the privilege of poverty and removes the Friars Minor as chaplains to the Poor Ladies.

1228 – The Pope restores the privilege of poverty and ministry by Friars Minor to Clare and the community at San Damiano.

1228 – Francis is canonised and Pope Gregory visits San Damiano.

1229 – Clare's sister Beatrice enters San Damiano.

1230 – Francis' remains are transferred to the newly built Lower Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi.

1234 – St Agnes, daughter of the King of Bohemia founds a monastery in Prague modelled on the Poor Ladies of San Damiano.

Clare's first letter to Agnes.

1240 – Clare's invocation of the Eucharistic Host and miraculous protection of the community at San Damiano during an attack by Saracens.

1241 – Through the intercessory prayers of the sisters, the city of Assisi is liberated from the siege of the imperial armies.

1247-53 – Clare begins to write her own Rule and her Testament.

1252 – Clare experiences Christmas Midnight Mass even though she is physically absent.

1253 – The Pope visits Clare and approves her Rule, 2 days before her death on August 11.

1255 – Canonisation of St Clare.

1260 – Clare's body and the San Damiano community are transferred to the Basilica of Santa Chiara.

1263 – The Order of San Damiano takes the name of the Order of St Clare.

Some Key Themes from the Lives of St Francis and St Clare

Following the Gospel

At the heart of Francis's conversion experience was his calling to live out and proclaim the good news of Christ. The living presence of Christ through the Gospel message became his sole source of energy, action, mission, direction, conviction, encouragement and sustenance. Clare's passion for the Gospel was ignited through the preaching and example of Francis and she lived out the same mission in her cloistered context.

The Incarnation

Central to Francis's personal theology was the love and goodness of God as exemplified in the reality of the Incarnation. Emmanuel, God with us, was understood by Francis to be at the heart of God's overarching and timeless purpose for humanity and the world.

Creation

The interconnectedness of all things is a theme of 21st century ecological understanding. Francis, in a remarkably prophetic manner, personalised the beauty and wonder of creation by affirming a familial relationship between himself (and all humanity), and the life forces and living things that sustain us.

Poverty & Simplicity

For Francis and Clare, a life of service to God involved shedding all ties of ownership or possession of money or goods. In Clare's case, this became a lifetime struggle to convince those with spiritual authority over her that she would accept nothing less than the same right to poverty that Francis and the brothers enjoyed.

Radical Love

Francis's commitment was to love in the same self-giving, courageous manner as his Lord and Master. His encounter with the leper was a turning-point in his understanding of how God strengthens us for the work of loving each other in community, in particular, the poor, the rejected, the despised.

Joy

In spite of Francis's zealous and uncompromising commitment to poverty and selflessness, he embraced all aspects of life with a deep joy. Through the realities of life that touch us all – suffering, rejection, conflict – Francis responded in an open and childlike way to the evidence of God's goodness which could be found in any circumstances.

Prayer

Clare and Francis's daily food was prayer and contemplation, a continual infilling of the Holy Spirit to guide and sustain their respective communities and themselves as individuals. This was coupled with a deep love of the Eucharist which nourishes the riches of Christ's life within us and between us.

From the Introduction to 'Surrounded by Love: Seven Teachings from Saint Francis' by Murray Bodo OFM

St Francis was not a medieval theologian, but a wisdom figure, a teacher of wisdom who used sayings, stories, and rituals to show us how we can allow God to transform our lives. In this, as in everything else, he was following in the footsteps of Jesus, who is the mystery of the fullness of God among us.

The Wonder of the Incarnation is the first and central teaching that St Francis left us. And from that core teaching six other teachings cascade: *The Paradox of Evangelical Poverty* and how it unites us to God and leads to *Living the Gospel* in our time and place. This living the Gospel leads us to how we are to *Go and Repair God's House*, and we repair God's house by *Making Peace*. Peacemaking leads to the realization that *God's House is All of Creation*. These first six teaching all involve a going down in order to rise.

Then, in the fullness of time, our living of these teachings are brought to completion in *The Joy of Humble Praise and Service of God* by embracing and serving all of God's creatures. This joy, then,

accompanies our final rising in a symbolic return to paradise. All seven teachings are rooted in the love of God, and so I have added an eighth chapter, entitled *The Teaching of Teachings: Love*.

The Prologue to the Three Companions

Resplendent as the dawn and as the morning star,
or even as the rising sun,
setting the world alight, cleansing it, and giving it fertility,
Francis was seen to rise as a kind of new light.
Like the sun he shone by his word and works upon a world
lying torpid amid wintry cold, darkness and sterility,
lighting it up with radiant sparks, illuminating it with the rays of
truth,
and setting it afire with charity,
renewing and embellishing it with abundant fruit of his merits,
and enriching it wonderfully with various fruit-bearing trees
in the three orders he founded.
Thus did he bring the world to a kind of season of spring.

‘A Pilgrim Walk’ – Elements of Pilgrimage

As we journey together we can build elements of pilgrimage into our days, ways of being that support us to be pilgrims rather than tourists:

Penance – No complaining. Instead say ‘thanks be to God’.

Community – Include the stranger in your group – no cliques.

Faith – Light candles as symbols of your faith.

Mystery – Observe silence in sacred places.

Celebration – Share our food, our joy, our love and our care.

Leadership lessons from St Francis

The following thoughts are taken from “The Lessons of St Francis” by John Michael Talbot

He practised what he preached – Francis lived his faith more than he spoke about it and his living example continues to speak eloquently into our times.

He was real – Francis’ struggle to find God and a sense of purpose in the midst of disappointment, illness, and family breakdown, is well-documented. We are drawn to him because we recognise that he is one of us.

He was passionate – Francis’ faith was not based on a collection of religious rules and rituals. He passionately and desperately loved God and this was reflected in his joyful love of everything God made.

He gave us hope – Francis emphasised innocence, hope and the positive possibilities of faith in God. This encourages us to look beyond all that disturbs us about Christianity and the world, and to rediscover God’s creating and redeeming heartbeat of love.

He was radical – Francis models a radical and uncompromising faith that burns away indifference and challenges any watered-down versions of what it means to follow Christ.

He was loving – although he was hard on himself, Francis was gentle with everyone else. His embracing warmth continues to break down walls of hostility, disrespect and judgment.

The Symbolism of the TAU

The TAU is the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet and represents the fulfilment of the revealed word of God. Since Old Testament times it has been used to symbolise God's salvation and love for humanity, and as a sign of redemption. Christians viewed the TAU as foreshadowing the Cross, the realisation of Old Testament promises, and the means by which Christ, the new Adam, reversed the disobedience of the old Adam.

The TAU reflected Francis' deep spiritual conviction that the salvation of every person is in the Cross of Christ. He would open his arms to show the friars that their religious habit mirrored the TAU, meaning that they were called upon to act as 'crucified' witnesses of a compassionate God and example of 'faith unto death'. He wrote the TAU on walls, in letters and on himself, and traced the sign of the TAU to dedicate his actions to the Lord.

Today, followers of Francis, lay and religious, wear the TAU as a sign of their membership of and commitment to the family of Franciscan spirituality.



Some Ways to 'Be a Pilgrim'

A Framework for Reflection (from Archbishop David Moxon)

As you explore a site, consider the following three questions:

1. What did God do in this place?
2. What is God doing in this place now?
3. What might God be saying to you or challenging you to do/be in response?

An Approach to Contemplation (after St Clare)

Some of the thoughts in the above section are drawn from a blogsite called 'Unhurried Living'.

In contrast to the Benedictine Lectio Divina approach which was prevalent in the time of Francis and Clare, the ultimate purpose of Franciscan contemplation is transformation into the likeness of God as shown to us through Christ and the incarnation.

Clare, in a letter to Agnes of Prague, wrote:

"Your Spouse, though more beautiful than the children of men (Ps 44: 3), became, for your salvation, the lowest of men, was despised, struck, scourged untold times throughout his entire body, and then died amid the suffering of the Cross.

O most noble Queen, **gaze** upon Him, **consider** Him, **contemplate** Him as you desire to **imitate** Him."

Monastic Focus (Lectio Divina)

Franciscan Focus

<i>4. Contemplation</i>	<i>1. Gaze</i>
<i>3. Prayer</i>	<i>2. Consider</i>
<i>2. Meditation</i>	<i>3. Contemplate</i>
<i>1. Reading</i>	<i>4. Imitate</i>

Gaze

One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple. (Psalm 27:4)

Gazing feels like a lost art. To **gaze** is to direct our prayerful focus on the crucified Christ and to be open to his leading. Such unhurried prayer may be characterised by silence and stillness that allows us to meet with Christ as an intimate friend, undistracted by the thoughts and cares of our everyday lives. This gazing is a posture of the heart, a stillness in God's presence, beholding. And the wonder here is that we are simply mirroring back the loving gaze that is already being directed at us.

Consider

"When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?" (Psalm 8:3-4)

To **consider** is to think carefully about. What might it look like for you to think carefully about what God has made? Then add to that the beautiful and humbling idea that God made and cares for you. As we consider the essence of God's sacrificial love in Christ our own flame of love is rekindled and we become open to an even deeper moment of understanding.

Contemplate

*"I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people."
(Ephesians 1:18)*

When we **contemplate** the living Spirit at work in us we become aware of God directing his gaze upon us, praying in us:

"Contemplation is not what I do, or what I do to God. It is what God

does to me through an invitation to intimacy and union” (Roch Niemier, O.F.M.).

The verse from Ephesians highlights the movement from contemplation to enlightenment, a shift in focus from head to heart that opens our hearts to hope. Allow the eyes of your heart to open wider to the riches of God.

Imitate

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

(Matthew 11:28)

Resting in God and learning from Jesus is a transformative gateway through which we discover our true identity as children of God, and, more and more, to **imitate** the life of Christ. Imitation is not a matter of our actions mimicking those of Jesus but rather, coming to know our unique self in the mirror of Christ, and then being strengthened by the Spirit to live out of that transformed identity.

Capturing the Experience

We will all have different and preferred ways for capturing our pilgrimage experiences. Here are some suggestions (with thanks to Phil Cousineau):

- Complete a daily journal entry, maybe at the same time each day;
- Write a personal blog - this can be shared with friends and family at home while you're away, but also provides a lasting record of your pilgrimage;
- Set yourself a goal of writing a poem for each day. Thinking of each place you visit as a possible 'poem' may change the way you see, listen, touch, interact with different sites;
- Take a sketch book and use your drawings to record significant moments;
- Write a song or Taize-like chant for or about each place that speaks to you.

Approaching some of the Important Sites

Mountain Sanctuaries – La Verna, the Carceri, Poggio Bustone, Fonte Colombo

The idea of retreating from the hustle and bustle of everyday life in order to draw close to God is a consistent theme throughout scripture. The psalmist frequently refers to God's presence on a holy hill, or to the idea of a sanctuary or refuge. For example, in Psalm 63 we read:

"O God you are my God: and earnestly will I seek you. My soul thirsts for you, my body yearns for you: like a land that is dry and thirsty for water. With this longing I have come before you in the sanctuary: that I may see your power and your glory."

And in Isaiah 2:

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths."

Jesus also sought refuge from the crowds of followers and interested spectators who pursued him throughout his ministry.

"In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed." Mark 1:35

"Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God." Luke 6:12

It is no surprise then that Francis was also in the habit of escaping into the hills to pray and to seek God's presence.

Common to these sanctuaries is the opportunity to experience silence and solitude as we walk or pray or rest. Take time to think about what these places meant to Francis. Like him, you could ask the question, "Lord, what would you have me do?" What might God be saying to you in and through the quietness, the beauty and the simplicity. Allow yourself to be refreshed and nurtured by God's creation and by his presence.

As you re-enter community, here or back home, think about active steps you might take to bring this kind of refreshment to those around you. How can you, and others in your everyday life, find or develop a sanctuary-like space to which you can retreat and be replenished?

The San Damiano Cross

The San Damiano Cross, hanging in the derelict church of San Damiano outside the walls of Assisi, was the means by which Jesus spoke directly to Francis, turning his heart towards Christ and defining his life and ministry from that time on. Today, a replica hangs in the simple Chapel of San Damiano and the original cross is found in the Chapel of the Crucifix in the Basilica of Santa Chiara.

Painted in the 11th century by an unknown artist, the Byzantine San Damiano Cross has become the central icon of the Franciscan Movement. 21st century pilgrims continue to be drawn to it in search of meaning, inspiration, or even personal messages from God into their own unique lives. So how can we sit beneath it, how can we read what God wants us to know and understand about Him and ourselves?

Perhaps begin by praying Francis' own prayer before the cross:

Most high and glorious God,
enlighten the darkness of my heart.
Give me sincere faith, confident hope,
perfect charity and profound humility.
Give me, Lord, awareness and understanding
that I might carry out your holy and true command. Amen

Spend time focusing on the figure of Christ on the cross, following St Clare's contemplative pattern – Gaze, Consider, Contemplate Christ, praying that when you return to the realities of your life you will be strengthened to Imitate Christ.

Notice that unlike most depictions of Christ on the cross, Jesus is fully alive and engaged. We can see his wounds but he is no longer nailed to the cross, instead seeming to float out from it, embracing the world. In place of a crown of thorns is the crown of glory with a Greek Cross embedded within it, a reference, like so much of this icon, to the Jesus of John's Gospel. The smaller Christ figure above is rising towards the Father through the angelic host, as the Father's hand stretches down towards him in blessing.

Within the lines of Jesus' forehead is the shape of a dove representing the Holy Spirit and his garments are priestly and embroidered with gold, not those of a condemned criminal. The thickness and strength of Jesus' neck, out of proportion when we view it from a western aesthetic, denotes his importance. Above him is the inscription from John's Gospel, 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews'.

Five tall figures beside Jesus are those who were present at the Crucifixion. Below his right arm are Mary and John, united in their devotion to Jesus and in their new familial relationship. Below his left arm is Mary Magdalene representing all of redeemed humanity, Mary, the Mother of James, and the Roman Centurion. There is speculation that the small figure just visible behind the Centurion is a child, maybe the healed child of the Centurion in Matthew and Luke's Gospels. However in iconography size denotes significance rather than age and it is more likely that the artist is placing himself into the icon, or that he is ensuring that we, too, can be present with the crucified and glorified Christ.

The scallop shell border surrounding the cross indicates that the action of the icon is taking place in the eternal, spiritual realm. If you look closely though, you will see that the border at the base of the cross remains open. The message for us is that we too can enter (from the foot of the cross) and participate in the redemptive work of Jesus, the Christ.



Basilica of San Francesco

Our guided tour of the Basilica will provide the backstory to the construction, in stages, of this magnificent building on the Hill of Hell where Francis had desired to be buried, in company with criminals, outcasts and the poor. It will also help us identify many of the Basilica's most important features.

Some of you may find the opulence at odds with all you have learned about Francis' humility, poverty and simplicity, and perhaps feel conflicted about what your response should be. However if we recall that the Basilica was built at a time when the majority of people were not literate, and before the invention of the printing press, Gerald Straub's description of it as 'the world's largest and most beautiful picture' gives a different perspective on its value and gift.

We will have time and opportunity to visit and re-visit the Basilica with pilgrim minds and hearts, to pray before the tomb of St Francis, and to allow the material and physical features to lead us into new spiritual understandings of ourselves and God. One way to do this is to move from the general to the specific, to seek out some corner or chapel or fresco that speaks to you and where you can be alone with God. Gaze, consider, contemplate, and ask God to transform some aspect of your life and allow his image to shine from you.

Perhaps you could use this prayer from St Francis? It gives a window into the heart of one who knew God so well, and in whom the flame of God burned brightly:

"You are holy, Lord, your deeds are wonderful; You are strong, great; You are Father, all Good, supreme Good. You are wisdom, love, humility, rest, peace, joy and gladness, and our riches. You are beauty, gentleness. You are courage, our haven and hope. You are our faith, eternal life, great and wonderful, almighty, merciful Saviour."

Chiara, Clare of Assisi

It isn't difficult to imagine the shock waves when, on the night of Palm Sunday 1212, Clare Favarone fled her aristocratic home in the upper section of Assisi to join the possibly mad, peripatetic preacher Francis Bernadone, and his band of brothers on the plains below the town. As the story unfolds, we begin to see the strength and character of Clare emerging and discover that she was a woman not only for her time but also for ours.

Chiara or Clare was named after God appeared to her expectant mother in a dream, telling her that the child she carried would bring God's light to the world. A contemporary of Clare's and biographer of Francis, Thomas of Celano, described her as 'Clare by name, brighter in life, and brightest by character.'

Clare's escape, carried out with assistance from Francis and with the full knowledge of the Bishop, provided a potential solution to a growing problem for Francis – how to deal with increasing numbers of women attracted to his radical vision of the Gospel. They needed a leader who shared and could articulate a commitment to Gospel living as powerfully and unswervingly as he himself, a woman who, like him, was in love with Christ.

Inspired by the freedom of Francis and the brothers, Clare envisaged a life similar to the women who accompanied Jesus and the disciples – ministering on the frontline, owning nothing, moving from place to place, and dependent on the charity of strangers for food and shelter. This was not to be. Being cloistered at San Damiano and eventually Abbess of the community was the complete opposite of her dreams and expectations, rather like being under house arrest, and for 46 years, until her death in 1253.

Two sites in particular are associated with Clare and in them we sense her presence and draw strength for our own journey. The little church and cloister of San Damiano lies outside the walls of the town and it is here that Clare led the Order of Poor Ladies for more

than four decades until her death in 1253. Clare's tomb and many relics from her life are found in the Basilica of Santa Chiara, along with the original San Damiano Cross which has remained in the keeping of the Poor Clares.

As we take time to pray and reflect in these two special places, think about the relevance of these four themes or qualities in Clare's life for you and your situation.

Faith: Clare's resilient, tested, honest **faith**, was continually nourished by prayer and compassionate action. Thomas of Celano wrote: "Clare would pray with the sisters... and after the others had gone to their hard couches to rest their tired limbs, she would remain watchful and unwearied in prayer, that while sleep lay hold of the others, she might 'by stealth' as it were 'catch a whisper of God'." In this, Clare's prayer life exemplified the Franciscan practice of praying long but with few words, allowing God to pray in us.

Sacrifice and suffering: Clare's life of service unfolded in an unexpected and sacrificial way, and she suffered from a range of painful and debilitating illnesses for much of her life. In spite of this, joy in suffering and sacrifice characterised her relationship with the sisters in her care. Anything difficult required of them was first modelled by Clare and this inspired huge loyalty and love. Sr Mary Seraphin wrote of Clare: "To her poverty, her emptiness, the great and good Lord will bow down. He himself will cross the abyss to reach her. She remembers that once he came despised, needy and poor into this world, that men and women who were in dire poverty and want, and suffering absolute need of heavenly nourishment might become rich in him by possessing the kingdom of heaven." This identification with Christ is a reminder of how we too may be strengthened to find joy and meaning in the most difficult and painful circumstances of our lives.

Courage: Clare's courage shines through in every circumstance of her life – courage to hold out against significant family persuasion and bullying to force her return home; courage to oppose the

succession of cardinals and popes determined to water down Franciscan radical poverty and bestow a gentler and more feminine rule on Clare's community; courage to confront attacking Saracen soldiers by leaving the cloister, kneeling, lifting the consecrated host, and praying for divine protection for the sisters and the town. Miraculously, the attacking forces slunk away in the face of such faith and courage.

Like Clare, there will be areas in our lives where courage is required – courage to find and be ourselves, courage to ask questions, to express doubts, or to be vulnerable, courage to stand in solidarity with the powerless, and courage to change and grow.

Intelligence: Clare's intelligence and strategic approach in the face of inevitable challenges has been a source of inspiration across the centuries. In spite of the restrictions of the cloister, she entertained on a scale that would have 21st century social media buzzing. She was a confidante and advisor, and, at times, formidable adversary, to a succession of Bishops, Cardinals and Popes, who came to her for advice and spiritual guidance; and she was a wise friend to Francis whose approach to ministry often created difficulties for himself and the brothers.

To call Clare Francis' little flower, or the moon to his sun, is to minimise all that she was and all that she stands for. If Clare was around today we can imagine Pope Francis would select her as a member of his group of eight Cardinals.

Two stories illustrate the qualities that place Clare alongside Francis for those on a Franciscan journey:

On one occasion the Pope decreed that it was improper for a Franciscan Brother to live with the Poor Ladies as their spiritual adviser. Clare's response was instant – yes, she would accept the Holy Father's ruling, on the assumption that the withdrawal of spiritual nourishment for the sisters also implied that physical nourishment was unimportant, and she put herself (not the sisters)

onto an immediate hunger strike. Needless to say, the Pope backed down immediately!

When Clare sought Papal blessing for her community's Rule, she encountered a huge block – a succession of Popes who would not accept that the same Rule of Poverty that men espoused was appropriate or should be expected of women. Clare disagreed and with uncompromising grace she argued with Bishops, Cardinals and Popes for decades, her community living under an informal Rule because she refused to accept a Rule that didn't include the Rule of Poverty. It was only 2 days before her death (there are those who believe that the very ill Clare put off death until she received the word of acceptance!) that a message was rushed to her bedside, that Pope Innocent IV had approved her Rule in its entirety.

What can we learn from Clare's radical political stance that will help us navigate 21st century turmoil. She challenges us to recognise the barriers that the institutional church places in the path of indigenous people, and any who are different or other, including women of faith. She challenges us to recognise practices that obscure the views and experiences of marginalised groups in the church and to render them invisible in our communities of faith. She challenges us as all to speak out on matters of justice within our own communities and beyond our shores.

As we reflect on Clare's remarkable life and legacy, her words resonate for us as they did for the sisters to whom she addressed them:

“What you hold may you always hold. What you do, may you always do and never abandon.”

Final Thoughts

As we encounter Francis and Clare in places that were significant in their lives, we need to evaluate all we have seen and heard and experienced in the light of God's call on our lives, as individuals and as members of faith communities, and as citizens of the world. This is the work of a lifetime but we know we are not alone in the struggle and the joy.

Clare and Francis were born for the time and place in which they found themselves, as are we. Let's pray for ourselves and each other that we will know our calling, and be prepared to act on it sacrificially, courageously, strategically. We do this in the company of Jesus of Nazareth, our brother and friend, in the power of the Spirit who strengthens us, and within the everlasting embrace of God, the eternal creator.

Francis of Assisi's final words are a key to how we might live into the vision of Gospel living that Francis and Clare still hold out to us:

"I have done what was mine; may Christ teach you what is yours"