

Francis and Clare, The Complete Works

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The First Letter of St. Clare to St. Agnes of Prague

To the esteemed and most holy virgin, the Lady Agnes, daughter of the most excellent and illustrious King of Bohemia: Clare, an unworthy servant of Jesus Christ and useless handmaid (Lk 17:10) of the Cloistered Ladies of the Monastery of San Damiano, her subject and servant in all things, presents herself totally with a special reverent prayer that she attain the glory of everlasting happiness (Sir 50:5)

As I hear of the fame of your holy conduct and irreproachable life, which is known not only to me but to the entire world as well, I greatly rejoice and exult in the Lord (Hab 3:18). I am not alone in rejoicing at such great news, but I am joined by all who serve and seek to serve Jesus Christ. For though you, more than others, could have enjoyed the magnificence and honor and dignity of the world, and could have been married to the illustrious Caesar with splendor befitting you and His Excellency, you have rejected all these things and have chosen with your whole heart and soul a life of holy poverty and destitution. Thus you took a spouse of more noble lineage, who will keep your virginity ever unspotted and unsullied, the Lord Jesus Christ:

When you have loved Him, you shall be chaste;
when you have touched Him, you shall become pure;
when you have accepted Him, you shall be a virgin.

Whose power is stronger,
Whose generosity is more abundant,
Whose appearance more beautiful,
Whose love more tender,
Whose courtesy more gracious.

In whose embrace you are already caught up;
who has adorned your breast with precious stones
and has placed priceless pearls in your ears
and has surrounded you with sparkling gems
as though blossoms of springtime
and placed on your head a golden crown
as a sign to all of your holiness.

Therefore, most beloved sister, or should I say, Lady worthy of great respect: because you are the spouse and the mother and the sister of my Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor 11:2; Mt 12:50) and have been adorned resplendently with the sign of inviolable virginity and most holy poverty: Be strengthened in the holy service which you have undertaken out of an ardent desire for the Poor Crucified, who for the sake of all of us took upon himself the Passion of the cross (Heb 12:2) and delivered us from the power of the Prince of Darkness (Col 1:13) to whom we were enslaved because of the disobedience of our first parents, and so reconciled us to God the Father (2 Cor 5:18).

O blessed poverty, who bestows eternal riches on those who love and embrace her!

O holy poverty, to those who possess and desire you God promises the kingdom of heaven and offers, indeed, eternal glory and blessed life!

O God-centered poverty, whom the Lord Jesus Christ who ruled and now rules heaven and earth, who spoke and things were made, condescended to embrace before all else!

The foxes have dens, He says, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man, Christ, has nowhere to lay His head, (Mt 8:20) but bowing His head He gave up His spirit. (Jn 19:20) If so great and good a Lord, then, on coming into the Virgin's womb, chose to appear despised, needy and poor in this world, so that people in utter poverty and want and in absolute need of heavenly nourishment might become rich (cf. 2 Cor 8:9) in Him by possessing the kingdom of heaven, then rejoice and be glad! (Hab 3:18). Be filled with a remarkable happiness and a spiritual joy! Contempt of the world has pleased you more than its honors, poverty more than earthly riches, and you have sought to store up greater treasures in heaven rather than on earth, where rust does not consume nor moth destroy, nor thieves break in and steal. (Mt 6:20) Your reward then, is very great in heaven (Mt 5:12)! And you have truly merited to be called a sister, spouse, and mother (2 Cor 11:2; Mt 12:50) of the Son of the Father of the Most High and of the glorious Virgin.

You know, I am sure, that the kingdom of heaven is promised and given by the Lord only to the poor: (cf. Mt 5:3) for he who loves temporal things loses the fruits of love. Such a person cannot serve God and Mammon, for either the

one is loved and the other hated, or the one is served and the other despised.
(Mt 6:24)

You also know that one who is clothed cannot fight with another who is naked, because he is more quickly thrown who gives his adversary a chance to get hold of him; and that one who lives in the glory of earth cannot rule with Christ in heaven.

Again, you know that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven (Mt 19:24)
Therefore you have cast aside your garments, that is, earthly riches, so that you might not be overcome by the one fighting against you, and that you might enter the kingdom of heaven through the straight path and the narrow gate.
(Mt 7:13-14)

What a great laudable exchange:
to leave the things of time for those of eternity,
to choose the things of heaven for the goods of earth,
to receive the hundred-fold in place of one,
and to possess a blessed and eternal life.

Because of this I have resolved, as best I can, to beg your excellency and your holiness by my humble prayers in the mercy of Christ, to be strengthened in His holy service, and to progress from good to better, from virtue to virtue (Ps 83:8), so that He whom you serve with the total desire of your soul may bestow on you the reward for which you long.

I also beg you in the Lord, as much as I can, to include in your holy prayers me, your servant, though unworthy, and the other sisters with me in the monastery, who are all devoted to you, so that by their help we may merit the mercy of Jesus Christ, and together with you may merit to enjoy the everlasting vision.

Farewell in the Lord. And pray for me.

The Second Letter of St. Clare to St. Agnes of Prague

To the daughter of the King of kings, the servant of the Lord of lords (Rev 19:16), the most worthy Spouse of Jesus Christ, and, therefore, the most noble Queen, Lady Agnes: Clare, the useless and unworthy servant (Lk 17:10) of the Poor Ladies: greetings and a wish for your perseverance in the life of the highest poverty.

I give thanks to the Giver of Grace, from whom we believe, every good and perfect gift proceeds (James 1:17), because He has adorned you with such splendors of virtue and signed you with such marks of perfection, that, since you have become such a diligent imitator of the Father of all perfection (Mt 5:48), His eyes do not see any imperfection in you.

This is the perfection which will prompt the King himself to take you to Himself in the heavenly bridal chamber where He is seated in glory on a starry throne because you have despised the splendors of an earthly kingdom and considered of little value the offers of an imperial marriage. Instead, as someone zealous for the holiest poverty, in the spirit of great humility and the most ardent charity, you have held fast to the footprints (1 Pt 2:21) of Him to whom you have merited to be joined as a Spouse.

But since I know that you are adorned with many virtues, I will spare my words and not weary you with needless speech, even though nothing seems superfluous to you if you can draw from it some consolation. Because one thing alone is necessary (Lk 10:42), I bear witness to that one thing and encourage you, for love of him to whom you have offered yourself as a holy and pleasing sacrifice, (Rm 12:1), that, like another Rachel (Gen 29:16), you always remember your resolution and be conscious of how you began.

What you hold, may you always hold.

What you do, may you always do and never abandon.

But with swift pace, light step,
and unswerving feet,

so that even your steps stir up no dust,
go forward securely, joyfully and swiftly,
on the path of prudent happiness,

believing nothing,
agreeing with nothing
which would dissuade you from this resolution
or which would place a stumbling block for you on the way,
so that you may offer your vows to the Most High
in the pursuit of that perfection
to which the Spirit of the Lord has called you.

In all of this, follow the example of our venerable Father, our Brother Elias, the Minister General, so that you may walk more securely in the way of the commands of the Lord (Ps 118:32). Prize it beyond the advice of others and cherish it as dearer to you than any gift. If anyone would tell you something else or suggest something which would hinder your perfection or seem contrary to your divine vocation, even though you must respect him, do not follow his counsel. But as a poor virgin, embrace the poor Christ.

Look upon Him who became contemptible for you, and follow Him, making yourself contemptible in the world for him. Your Spouse, though more beautiful than the children of men (Ps 44:3), became, for your salvation, the lowest of men, despised, struck, scourged untold times throughout His whole body, and then died amid the sufferings of the cross. O most noble Queen, gaze upon Him, consider Him, contemplate Him, as you desire to imitate Him.

If you suffer with Him, you shall reign with Him,
if you weep with Him, you shall rejoice with Him;
if you die with Him on the cross of tribulation,
you shall possess heavenly mansions in the splendor of the saints
and, in the Book of Life, your name shall be called glorious among humankind.

Because of this you shall share always and forever the glory of the kingdom of heaven in place of earthly and passing things, and everlasting treasures instead of those that perish, and you shall live forever.

Farewell, most dear Sister, yes, and Lady, because of the Lord, your Spouse. Commend me and my sisters to the Lord in your fervent prayers, for we rejoice in the good things of the Lord that He works in you through His grace.

Commend us truly to your sisters as well.

The Third Letter of St. Clare to St. Agnes of Prague

To the lady who is most respected in Christ and the sister loved more than all other human beings, Agnes, sister of the illustrious king of Bohemia, but now the sister and spouse of the Most High King of heaven: Clare, the most lowly and unworthy handmaid of Christ and servant of the Poor Ladies, wishes you the joys of redemption in the Author of salvation (Heb 2:10) and every good thing that can be desired.

I am filled with such joys at your well-being, happiness, and marvelous progress through which, I understand, you have advanced in the course you have undertaken to win the prize of heaven (Phil 3:14). And I sigh with such happiness in the Lord because I know you see that you make up wonderfully what is lacking both in me and the other sisters in following the footprints of the poor and humble Jesus Christ.

I can rejoice truly – and no one can rob me of such joy – because I now possess what under heaven I have desired. For I see that, helped by a special gift of wisdom from the mouth of God Himself and in an awe-inspiring and unexpected way, you have brought to ruin the subtleties of our crafty enemy and the pride that destroys human nature and the vanity that infatuates human hearts.

I see too, that by humility, the virtue of faith, and the strong arms of poverty, you have taken hold of that incomparable treasure hidden in the field of the world and in the hearts of men (Mt 13:44), with which you have purchased that field of Him by whom all things are made from nothing. And, to use the words of the Apostle himself in their proper sense, I consider you as a co-worker of God Himself (1 Cor 3:9; Rm 16:3) and a support of the weak members of His ineffable Body. Who is there, then, who would not encourage me to rejoice over such marvelous joys?

Therefore, dearly beloved, may you too always rejoice in the Lord (Phil 4:4). And may neither bitterness nor a cloud of sadness overwhelm you, O dearly beloved Lady in Christ, joy of the angels and crown of your sisters!

Place your mind before the mirror of eternity!
Place your soul in the brilliance of glory!
Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance!
And transform your whole being
into the image of the Godhead itself through contemplation!
So that you too may feel what His friends feel
as they taste the hidden sweetness
which God Himself has reserved
from the beginning
for those who love Him.

Since you have cast aside all those things which, in this deceitful and turbulent world, ensnare their blind lovers, love Him totally who gave Himself totally for your love. His beauty the sun and moon admire; and of His gifts there is no limit in abundance, preciousness, and magnitude. I am speaking of Him, who is the Son of the Most High, whom the Virgin brought to birth and remained a virgin after His birth. Cling to His most sweet Mother who carried a Son whom the heavens could not contain; and yet she carried Him in the little enclosure of her holy womb and held Him on her virginal lap.

Who would not dread the treacheries of the enemy of mankind, who, through the arrogance of momentary and deceptive glories, attempts to reduce to nothing that which is greater than heaven itself? Indeed, is it not clear that the soul of the faithful person, the most worthy of all creatures because of the grace of God, is greater than heaven itself? For the heavens with the rest of creation cannot contain their Creator. Only the faithful soul is His dwelling place and His throne, and this is possible only through the charity which the wicked do not have. He who is the Truth has said: Whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him, and we shall come to him and make our dwelling place with him (Jn 14:21).

Therefore, as the glorious Virgin of virgins carried Christ materially in her body, you, too, by following in His footprints (cf. 1 Pet 2:21), especially those of poverty and humility, can, without any doubt, always carry Him spiritually in your chaste and virginal body. And you will hold Him by whom you and all things are held together (Wis 1:7; Col 1:17), thus possessing that which, in comparison with the other transitory possessions of this world, you will possess more securely. How many kings and queens of this world let

themselves be deceived! For, even though their pride may reach the skies and their heads through the clouds, in the end they are as forgotten as a dung-heap!

Now concerning those matters which you have asked me to clarify for you: Which are the specific feasts our most glorious Father Saint Francis urged us to celebrate in a special way by a change of food, feasts of which, I believe, you already have some knowledge – I propose to respond to your love.

Your prudence should know then that, except for the weak and the sick, for whom Saint Francis advised and admonished us to show every possible care in matters of food, none of us who are healthy and strong should eat anything other than Lenten fare, either on ferial days or on feast days. Thus, we must fast every day except Sundays and the Nativity of the Lord, on which days we may have two meals. And on ordinary Thursdays everyone may do as she wishes, so that she who does not wish to fast is not obliged. However, we who are well should fast every day except on Sundays and on Christmas.

During the entire Easter week, as the writing of Saint Francis tells us, and on the feasts of the Blessed Mary and of the holy Apostles, we are not obliged to fast, unless these feasts occur on a Friday. And, as I have already said, we who are well and strong always eat Lenten fare.

But our flesh is not bronze nor is our strength that of stone (Jb 6:12). No, we are frail and inclined to every bodily weakness! I beg you, therefore, dearly beloved, to refrain wisely and prudently from an indiscreet and impossible austerity in the fasting that I know you have undertaken. And I beg you in the Lord to praise the Lord by your very life, to offer to the Lord your reasonable service (Rm 12:1), and your sacrifice always seasoned with salt (Lev 2:13).

May you do well in the Lord, as I hope I myself do. And remember me and my sisters in your prayers.

The Fourth Letter of St. Clare to St. Agnes of Prague

To her who is the half of her soul and the special shrine of her heart's deepest love, to the illustrious Queen and Bride of the Lamb, the eternal King: to the Lady Agnes, her most dear mother, and, of all the others, her favorite daughter: Clare, an unworthy servant of Christ and a useless handmaid (Lk 17:10) of His handmaids in the monastery of San Damiano of Assisi: health and a prayer that she may sing a new song with the other most holy virgins before the throne of God and of the Lamb and follow the Lamb wherever He may go (Rev 14:3-4).

O mother and daughter, spouse of the King of all ages, if I have not written to you as often as your soul and mine as well desire and long for, do not wonder or think that the fire of love for you glows less sweetly in the heart of your mother. No, this is the difficulty: the lack of messengers and the obvious dangers of the roads. Now, however, as I write to your love, I rejoice and exult with you in the joy of the Spirit (1 Thes 1:6), O bride of Christ, because, since you have totally abandoned the vanities of this world, like another most holy virgin, Saint Agnes, you have been marvelously espoused to the spotless Lamb who takes away the sins of the world (1 Pt 1:19; Jn 1:29).

Happy, indeed, is she
to whom it is given to share this sacred banquet,
to cling with all her heart to Him
whose beauty all the heavenly hosts admire unceasingly,
whose love inflames our love,
whose contemplation is our refreshment,
whose graciousness is our joy,
whose gentleness fills us to overflowing,
whose remembrance brings a gentle light,
whose fragrance will revive the dead,
whose glorious vision will be the happiness
of all the citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem;

Inasmuch as this vision is the splendor of eternal glory (Heb 1:3), the brilliance of eternal light and the mirror without blemish (Wis 7:26), look

upon that mirror each day, O queen and spouse of Jesus Christ, and continually study your face within it, so that you may adorn yourself within and without with beautiful robes and cover yourself with the flowers and garments of all the virtues, as becomes the daughter and most chaste bride of the Most High King. Indeed, blessed poverty, holy humility, and ineffable charity are reflected in that mirror, as, with the grace of God, you can contemplate them throughout the entire mirror.

Look at the parameters of this mirror, that is, the poverty of Him who was placed in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes. O marvelous humility, O astonishing poverty! The King of the angels, the Lord of heaven and earth, is laid in a manger! Then, at the surface of the mirror, dwell on the holy humility, the blessed poverty, the untold labors and burdens which He endured for the redemption of all mankind. Then, in the depths of this same mirror, contemplate the ineffable charity which led Him to suffer on the wood of the cross and die thereon the most shameful kind of death. Therefore, that Mirror, suspended on the wood of the cross, urged those who passed by to consider it, saying: "All you who pass by the way, look and see if there is any suffering like My suffering!" (Lam 1:2). Let us answer Him with one voice and spirit, as He said: Remembering this over and over leaves my soul downcast within me (Lam 3:20)! From this moment, then, O queen of our heavenly King, let yourself be inflamed more strongly with the fervour of charity!

As you contemplate further His ineffable delights, eternal riches and honors, and sigh for them in the great desire and love of your heart, may you cry out:

Draw me after You!
We will run in the fragrance of Your perfumes,
O heavenly Spouse!
I will run and not tire,
until You bring me into the wine-cellar,
until Your left hand is under my head
and Your right hand will embrace me happily
and You will kiss me with the happiest kiss of Your mouth.

In this contemplation, may you remember your poor little mother, knowing that I have inscribed the happy memory of you indelibly on the tablets of my heart, holding you dearer than all the others.

What more can I say? Let the tongue of the flesh be silent when I seek to express my love for you; and let the tongue of the Spirit speak, because the love that I have for you, O blessed daughter, can never be fully expressed by the tongue of the flesh, and even what I have written is an inadequate expression.

I beg you to receive my words with kindness and devotion, seeing in them at least the motherly affection which in the fire of charity I feel daily toward you and your daughters, to whom I warmly commend myself and my daughters in Christ. On my part, these very daughters of mine, especially the most prudent virgin Agnes, our sister, recommend themselves in the Lord to you and your daughters.

Farewell, my dearest daughter, to you and your daughters until we meet at the throne of the glory of the great God (Tit 2:13), and desire this for us. Inasmuch as I can, I recommend to your charity the bearers of this letter, our dearly beloved Brother Amatus, beloved of God and men (Sir 45:1), and Brother Bonagura. Amen.