



**SOLLEMNITAS  
SANCTÆ CLARÆ ASSISIENSIS  
2017**

Litteræ Ministri Generalis Ordinis Fratrum Minorum

“... *But with swift pace  
and light step ...*”  
(cfr. 2LAg 12)

Dear Sisters,

May the Lord give you peace!

The solemn feast of our Holy Mother St. Clare is an opportunity for us to reflect on contemporary issues that present a real challenge to our way of life and to our following of Jesus Christ the Lord. Ours are complex times; they demand a capacity to read events and to come up with new ways of faithfully living our charism, walking with the women and men of our time and speaking words of mercy and hope to them. Crises surround us, both at the level of society and of the individual — and we ourselves are not immune. These difficulties also touch our lives and our communities.

The Lord can teach us to see these crises as *opportunities*; together let's listen to what the Scriptures and the witness of Clare of Assisi suggest to us.

We Friars Minor have chosen a theme for next year's Plenary Council of the Order. There are three key concepts that will guide us: *listening*, *discerning*, and *action*. I believe that these words can also be meaningful for you, dear sisters. You too are called to face new challenges, to respond to demands that are unsettling and perplexing and, within this complex reality, to remain faithful to the Gospel thinking of Holy Mother Church.

## LISTENING

The Bible is full of calls to listen; the believing person knows how to listen, how to perceive

the voice of the Lord, and then how to choose a positive response. The *Acts of the Apostles* speaks eloquently of various situations when the first Christian communities listened deeply. One example of this is the episode when Spirit would not allow the disciples to proclaim the Gospel in Asia, and a subsequent vision then exhorted them to leave for Macedonia (cf. *Acts* 16:6-10). The Word of God gives direction and the Spirit gives guidance; these are communicated through life events, through circumstances, and by means of the intuitions of the heart.

As her sisters tell us, Clare also knew how to live in a continuous attitude of listening. Listening to God in silence and in unceasing prayer; listening to the sisters with great care, knowing their sufferings and desperation “*though the Spirit*”, even when these needs were not openly expressed (Cf. *PC* 2,23); listening and sharing in the fears of her fellow-citizens when they were threatened by enemy attacks (Cf. *PC* 3,19)

Your listening must also be free and attentive, emerging from your silent relationship with God, as well as from your sharing with the sisters. This occurs when you gather around the Word of God and together face whatever is happening in your lives. Your listening should be alert, open, and unprejudiced; it should be active, wise, intelligent, and able to go beyond appearances; it should be empathetic, engaging, and enthusiastic. If we are to really hear what the Spirit is saying in the silence of ordinary life, we need to be secure in our identity and willing to be pilgrims directed by God's promises which are daily renewed in us. Listening keeps us moving, and it is sometimes uncomfortable, moving us out of ourselves and

our securities, asking us questions that require new answers.

## DISCERNING

If the first step in understanding how to respond to our vocation and find direction on the journey is to listen to the voice of God in the complex realities of today, then what comes next is the whole area of discernment. The voice of God and the signs we that we perceive in the unfolding of history must be authentically interpreted, examined, and understood. Discernment is as necessary and urgent as it is delicate, and it is not by chance that Pope Francis continues to point to this process as an undertaking deserving of patience and perseverance.

Once again, the early Christian communities show us how to put into practice a Gospel approach which included debate, reading the Word and discussing it, prayer and a willingness to question, and the pursuit of the common good. The foundations for their process of discernment were an awareness of the gift of the Spirit and of His active grace, and their custom of gathering together to face challenges. They practiced clear and sincere communication, mutual trust, wise interpretation of reality, and careful listening to Scripture. This led to the assembly coming to decisions which resolved conflicts, promoted freedom and responsibility, and brought joy and encouragement to the sisters and brothers (Cf. *Acts* 15:1-35).

At many times during her life, Clare needed to exercise sensitive and decisive discernment. Just think of the frank and constructive exchange she had with Cardinal Ugolino, later Pope Gregory IX, regarding the originality of the way of life of the San Damiano community and its relationship to ecclesiastical institutions. What was involved was not just Clare's personal conviction, but her awareness that it was essential to safeguard the gift of a vocation received from the Father of Mercy (Cf. *TestCl*, 2). Such an awareness was nourished by prayer — in a constant relationship with the Father, clinging to the poor Christ, and

in union with the Holy Spirit. For Clare, prayer is not something closed; it expands when it is allowed to be permeated by the passion and the limitless charity of Christ. Because of this, she sees concrete reality as the place where God's will can be known and done. The sisters' needs, the frailties she experienced in herself and others, various trials and tensions, were seen by Clare not as obstacles, but as opportunities. In these, the charism of contemplation could be interwoven with that of charity, and thus together bring about discernment. The *Rule* (4:15-18) recalls the importance of the weekly Chapter, and of together seeking ways in which each sister's vocation can be fully lived. Every step of the journey is seen in terms of concrete, daily reality.

Sisters, you too are called to discernment. Contemporary reality faces us with deeper and deeper questions about the meaning of life. Our times are times of speed, noise, and information that is instant and global. We live in a time when anthropological changes are occurring because of technologies and social media. In these circumstances, what significance has the silence and contemplation that is part of our lives? On the one hand, our world is characterized by fragmentation, sectoral divisions, and special interest groups, and on the other it is marked by a tendency towards uniformity and group think. Given that you are called to unity in diversity, both on a personal and community level, what can your life offer to such a world? What responses can we come up with, how can we dialogue in order to grow together, how can we ensure that the autonomy of the monastery does not become a protective wall, but instead is a resource to be offered in a process of common discernment?

I believe that these are questions that your communities can grapple with in a spirit of energy, conviction, and hope — trusting that we are being led by the Spirit.

## ACTION

Listening, discerning, and lastly acting. This activity is undergirded by a profound and

intelligent listening, and by a serious and open discernment. Thus, what will emerge will be life choices that are courageous and daring, full of the prophetic quality of Peter, James, and Paul who led the Church to open herself to newness, expanding in welcome to the pagans (Cf. *Acts* 15:1-35).

Our action should be free, and made fruitful by mercy — after the example of Clare who, as a woman and a Poor Sister, did not hesitate to ease her sister's painful hip by laying her own body on it and by taking off her veil to give her sister warmth (Cf *PC* 7:12). Or when she longed to be martyred in Morocco, full of courage and a desire to go above and beyond in her self-giving (Cf. *PC* 6:6).

Let your activity be courageous too, sisters! Mindful of challenges, and with the alertness of those who open themselves to the future with hope, and who are faithful and secure in their vocation, have the courage to risk prophetic life choices. Sometimes changes in communities happen only because there is no other option. In circumstances where things cannot continue as they have been, decisions are made that may, or may not, be well considered or effective. I ask myself, and I ask you, if this must necessarily be the case. Would it not be possible instead to choose change, being motivated and arriving at change through a process of shared convictions and a search for goodness and life? Doing this with courage and trust, accepting the challenge, and ready to lose something so that your life can continue to flourish?

Many communities live with the reality of ageing and fragility, factors that raise questions about their future. Some find themselves in difficult situations and feel themselves called to a new form of sharing life with their brothers and sisters. Formation is challenged to address the issue of learning new ways and languages so as to sustain meaningful and positive dialogue with people of today; when young people come to us, they require attentive discernment and wise accompaniment. The structure itself of your way of life and that of your monasteries is called into question when the demands of autonomy become too great, and when the best way forward is communion. The call to life in its fullness continues to be given to us, and we can together respond to this call and entrust ourselves to God's promises. It is wonderful to have the freedom to make conscious, shared choices which dare to move beyond established practices — to make decisions that open up new ways of promoting life, faithful to the Gospel and to the fundamentals of your identity: the poverty and fraternity that Clare and Francis have given us as our heritage.

I entrust the friars to your prayers; they too are on a journey of listening, discernment and action.

May the Father of Mercies bless every one of you and bless your communities. May Holy Mother Church accompany you on your way.

Happy Feast Day!

Rome, August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2017  
*Feast of the Portiuncula*



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