

St. Clare of Assisi

BORN 1194; DIED 1253
VIRGIN, RELIGIOUS, AND FOUNDER
FEAST DAY: AUGUST 11

THE CALL OF RADICAL POVERTY is demanding, but only in relative terms. For St. Clare of Assisi and those who followed her, they gave up nothing, and gained everything, as St. Paul said: *“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ”* (Phil 3:7).

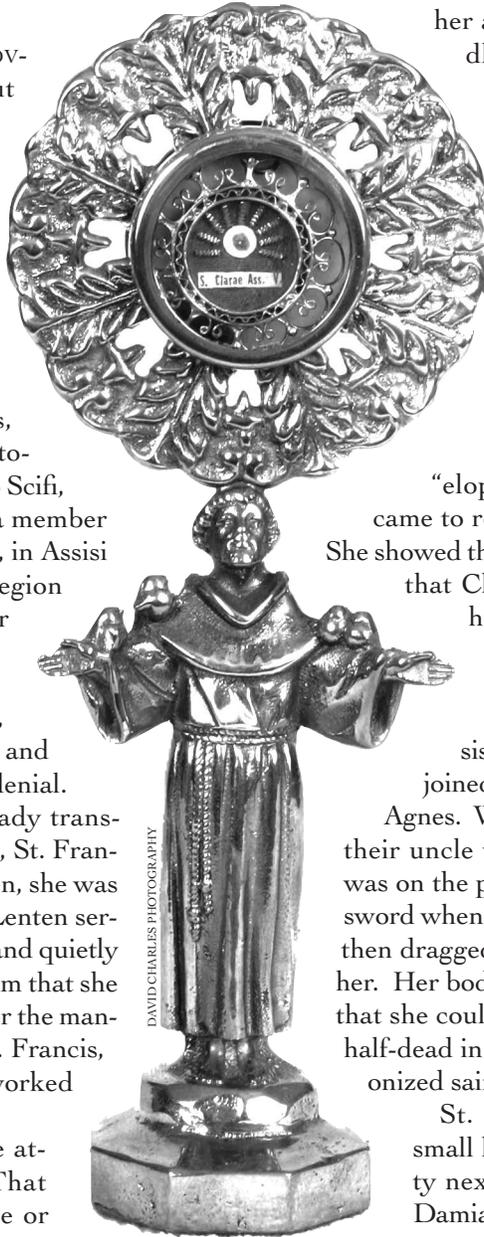
The oldest of three girls, Clare was born of the aristocratic and wealthy Favorino Scifi, count of Sasso-Rosso and a member of an ancient Roman family, in Assisi (in the modern Umbrian region of central Italy). Her mother Ortolana Fuimi was well-known for her piety and zeal and, even as a child, Clare was unusually devout and had begun practicing self-denial. She grew up in a city already transfixed by its other native son, St. Francis. When she was seventeen, she was so inspired by St. Francis’ Lenten sermons that she immediately and quietly sought him out. She told him that she ardently desired to live “after the manner of the holy Gospel.” St. Francis, responding to her fervor, worked out her next steps.

On Palm Sunday, Clare attended Mass as usual. That night, accompanied by one or two companions, she stole from home and went to Our Lady of

the Angels chapel (also called “The Portiuncula”) a mile outside Assisi. St. Francis and the members of his community met her at the door with lighted candles. Once inside, her companions helped her remove her fine dress and replace it with a sackcloth tunic tied with a cord. Francis cut her hair and covered her head with a heavy veil. He then sent her to a convent near Assisi. In this manner, she began a life of radical poverty, prayer, and penance.

When they learned of Clare’s “elopement,” some of her family came to remove her from the convent. She showed them her cut hair and told them that Christ had called her to serve him and that she would have no other spouse. A few days later, St. Francis sent her to a different convent near Assisi. Shortly afterward she was joined by her fifteen-year-old sister Agnes. With other relatives, all armed, their uncle went to retrieve Agnes. He was on the point of striking Agnes with a sword when his arm withered. The others then dragged her out, hitting and kicking her. Her body, however, became so heavy that she could not be carried and was left half-dead in a field. (Agnes is also a canonized saint.)

St. Francis eventually found a small house for the little community next door to the church of San Damiano, a church important in the beginning of his own calling. Much against Clare’s will, he appointed her ab-



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A reliquary cast as a statue of St. Francis of Assisi containing a relic, a small fragment of bone, of St. Clare of Assisi

ness, a position she held until her death. There she was joined by her mother (now Bl. Orolana), her sister Beatrice and aunt Bianca, three women of a noble Florentine family, and others. They became the Second Order of St. Francis, the Order of the Poor Ladies, popularly called the Poor Clares, living a cloistered (enclosed) life. Within a few years, Poor Clare convents were founded in several locations in Italy, and in France and Germany. Clare inspired numerous women, many of them from high-ranking families, to renounce everything to enter upon this new way of life.

The community owned no property, went barefoot, never ate meat, slept on the ground, and kept silence except when necessary or charity demanded. Clare herself wore a hair shirt, fasted often and all through Lent, living only on bread and water, and did not eat at all some days. St. Francis had to moderate the community's, and especially Clare's, ascetic practices, and she accepted that this moderation was desirable — "sacrifice seasoned with the salt of prudence." Yet she was St. Francis' best disciple in living a call to poverty. She fought papal permission for the community to own property even in common. (Today there are two major kinds of Poor Clares, those that observe this strictly, and those that own property in common, divided among sixteen observances (variations of the origi-



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nal rule) with as many abbreviations to identify each observance. Altogether, there are about twenty thousand Poor Clare nuns.)

To Clare is attributed the protection of Assisi from the army of Frederick II of Swabia, a man bent on gaining territory. Assisi was first attacked by Saracen mercenaries in his army. San Damiano, outside the walls, was their first target. As the attackers were scaling the convent's walls, a very ill Clare was helped out of bed by her sisters. She took a ciborium with the Blessed Sacrament from a chapel next to her cell, faced

an open window, and raised the ciborium. The Saracens fell backward and fled. Soon thereafter, a larger force laid siege to Assisi. For a day and a night, the nuns covered their heads with ashes and begged God for deliverance of the town. A fearful storm broke over the army; it panicked and again fled.

Even though Clare was ill for most of the last thirty years of her life, she lived a life of complete service to her community. She was devoted to the Eucharist. When she would complete her prayers, her face, like Moses', was so radiant it dazzled the eyes of anyone who saw her. She was a spiritual support to St. Francis, advising and encouraging him. Together

with St. Francis, her unworldliness helped elevate the moral life of their contemporaries throughout Europe and to rebuild the Church's spiritual vigor.