

Incarnational Leadership as Reflected in St. Clare's Third Letter to Agnes: A Sensory-Aesthetic Study

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This paper employs socio-rhetorical analysis as described by Robbins to explore the spiritual life and pragmatic leadership of Saint Clare of Assisi. Using incarnational leadership as a platform from which to view Clare's example, the inner texture of her Third Letter to Agnes of Prague is analyzed by means of the sensory-aesthetic patterns and measures. The sensory-aesthetic texture that emerges in Clare's writing positions her leadership as congruent with Niewold's proposed incarnational leadership model. The richness and depth that become evident in Clare's letter to Agnes reflect the richness and depth of her incarnational life and leadership, and therefore, proffer an example much needed in a world that today regards the Christian example as insignificant and meaningless.

Clare of Assisi is epitomized by Armstrong and Brady (1982) as the most dedicated follower of Francis of Assisi and "one of the great women of the Christian and Franciscan tradition" (p. 169). At the time of Pope Alexander IV's proclamation of Clare as saint, the symbolism of her name and life were captured in his words:

O Clare, endowed with so many titles of clarity! Clear (*clara*) even before your conversion, clearer (*clarior*) in your manner of living, exceedingly clear (*praeclarior*) in your enclosed life, and brilliant (*clarissima*) in splendor after the course of your mortal life. In Clare, a clear mirror is given to the entire world (Armstrong & Brady, 1982).

Gazing into this clear mirror, a reflection of one who lived and led incarnationally becomes evident. Although Clare assumed the role of abbess only out of obedience and then with reticence, she gave leadership to those who would become known as the "Poor Ladies of Assisi" at San Damiano and who are now known as the "Poor Clares" (Armstrong & Brady, p. 171).

This paper seeks to gain a deeper appreciation of Clare's spirituality and leadership by exploring the inner texture of her writing, specifically the sensory-aesthetics of her Third Letter to Agnes of Prague (3LAg). According to Armstrong and Brady (1982), Clare's four letters offer insight into

the spiritual life out of which her vocation is lived. Building from her treatise on the essentials of the vocation in the first two letters, Clare's third letter to Agnes suggests a deeply inspired wisdom and perseverance in the face of challenge and struggle. Her writings furthermore suggest a model of incarnational leadership as described by Niewold (2006).

Incarnational Leadership

The first use of the term incarnational leadership is reported by Niewold (2006) to have emerged in the mid-1990s. Flammig (1995 as cited in Niewold) contributed an article to *The Theological Educator* entitled "Incarnational Leadership for Ministry," in which he notes "we live with a constant tension between being in our world and not being fashioned by it; incarnational leadership demands that we enter and become immersed in the culture in which we serve without yielding our spirit to its limitations and authority" (p. 13). Niewold additionally references Nelson (1996), a servant leader theorist who stresses that Christian leadership is an ontological rather than merely behavioral phenomenon. "Incarnational leadership means one must lead primarily out of *who one is*, and not what one knows, who one knows, what one can do or how one can do it" (Nelson, p. 74 as cited in Niewold).

Incarnational leadership as developed so far in the literature, says Niewold (2006), is not a theological concept, but a pragmatic concept based exclusively on the practiced example of Jesus' life. The idea of incarnational leadership as experienced so far in the Christian community emerges not from the historic doctrine of the incarnation so much as from the life lessons drawn from the daily activities of Jesus' incarnational consciousness (Niewold). This incarnational consciousness is critical to Christian leadership, posits Niewold, and it is this incarnational consciousness that becomes so evident in the writings of St. Clare to Agnes of Prague.

Clare of Assisi and Agnes of Prague

Clare of Assisi (1193/4-1253), eschewed a life of privilege to become the first woman to form a new kind of religious rule, gaining pontifical approval only through perseverance and unwavering faith (Carney, 1993). Similarly, Agnes of Prague (1203-1282), following in the example of Clare, renounced a life of aristocratic privilege for a life of contemplation and prayer as a "Poor Lady" (Armstrong, 2006, p. 39).

It seems likely, posits Armstrong (2006), that Clare initiated communication with Agnes as an encouragement at the time of Agnes' embracing of the religious life. Over a period of nineteen years, Clare provided continued encouragement and leadership to Agnes. Armstrong suggests Clare's Third Letter to Agnes was likely written in response to confusion resulting from an imposed papal bull regarding practices of fasting. Clare's Third Letter, probably written in the summer of 1238 (Armstrong), contains advice addressing this concern, and is considered by Mueller, (2001) as "a masterpiece of early Franciscan literature" (p. 73) reflecting the practice of incarnational living.

The remainder of this paper begins with a discussion on the use of socio-rhetorical criticism as a means to the study of text, followed by an in-depth exploration of the sensory-aesthetic inner texture of Clare's Third Letter to Agnes. Throughout this exploration, interaction with evidence of incarnational leadership in Clare's writing will be highlighted.

Socio-Rhetorical Criticism

Robbins (1996) positions socio-rhetorical criticism as an approach to the study of literature that focuses detailed attention to the text itself, integrating the way language is used with the world in which the author and reader live. "Like an intricately woven tapestry, a text contains complex patterns and images" (Robbins, 1996a, p. 2) or multiple textures. Robbins describes five textures observable within a text: (a) inner texture, (b) inter-texture, (c) social and cultural texture, (d) ideological texture, and (e) sacred texture. The inner texture of a text, according to Robbins, may include features such as repetition of particular words, the use of beginnings and endings, alternating speech and storytelling, presentation of arguments, and the particular feel or aesthetic of the text. It is through this last texture, the sensory-aesthetic, that the inner texture of Clare's Third Letter to Agnes is explored.

According to Bekker (2005), the questions asked in aesthetic textural analysis explore images that are represented in the text. Imagery that is used in a given text engages the conscious and subconscious imaginations of the readers of the text. Robbins (1996b) suggests the sensory-aesthetic texture of a text focuses on "the range of senses the discourse evokes and the manner in which the discourse embodies those senses" (p. 89). Sensory-aesthetic texture "moves beyond inner reasoning into the evocative power of all the senses available to human life and imagination" (p. 92) opening insights that might otherwise remain un-experienced and invisible to an initial analysis or interpretation.

"The sensory-aesthetic texture of a text," according to Robbins (1996a), "resides prominently in the range of senses the text evokes or embodies (thought, emotion, sight, sound, touch, smell) and the manner in which the text evokes or embodies them (reason, intuition, imagination, humor, etc.)" (p. 30). Robbins further proposes three body zones that represent sensory-aesthetic texture: (a) emotion-fused thought, (b) self-expressive speech, and (c) purposeful action. The inner texture of Clare's Third Letter to Agnes and her model of incarnational leadership will be explored through the structure of these three zones.

Emotion-Fused Thought

Emotion-fused thought says Robbins (1996a) includes representations of the physical eye, heart, eyelid, or pupil but also the activities of these organs which include seeing, knowing, thinking, understanding, or remembering. In Clare's Third Letter to Agnes, the human heart is established as a common bond and means of communication and transformation.

The Physical Heart. Armstrong (2006) suggests Clare engages with Agnes from a clearly shared vision, as "heart speaking to heart" (p. 20). Early in her third letter, Clare references the human

heart (3LAg 6, 7, 13) calling Agnes to appreciate and engage her heart with that of the divine. King (2001) notes "the call to seek God's love above all things becomes a splendid adventure that engages the whole human being: body, mind and soul" (p. 13). As a mystic, Clare experiences a profoundly personal encounter with God and God's touch is most strongly felt deep within her heart (King).

These are not merely desirable behaviors but an ontological representation of the incarnational life of Clare. Lainati (1994) poetically notes that "Clare's poverty was the empty space which the word of God excavated in her heart in order to gather there the fullness of the Good" (p. 65). Clare's heart was centered only on Him and she was "the vine branch which at every moment drank new sap from the vine" (Lainati, p. 70). This appreciation of the heart is not a practiced behavior but a state of being for Clare, a state she desires for Agnes. However, beyond the common bond of the heart, Clare engages Agnes through the call to remember.

The Act of Remembering. "To remember is to make present" (Fonck, 1996, p. 62). For Clare the bringing to mind and making present the Christ was a source of intense light which illuminates existence, meaning, and purpose in life. Physical distance may have separated these two women, but the act of remembering dynamically makes them present to each other (3LAg42). According to Fonck, this revelatory act dynamically engages the heart, mind, attitude and behavior of others, "prompting inspiration and imitation, motivation and modeling" (p. 74). Through her words, Clare reaches across space and time to engage Agnes from a deeply spiritual source. Yet it is not just from a place of the heart that Clare reaches out to Agnes; Clare seeks to activate the mind of Agnes as well, an area also representative of the emotion-focused zone described by Robbins (1996a 1996b).

Nouns and adjectives such as intelligence, wisdom, blindness, and joy are also useful indicators of the emotion-fused thought zone (Robbins, 1996a). Robbins further suggests that from a western culture perspective, this zone would include ideas such as intellect, will, affect, judgment, consciousness, or personality.

The Mind. According to Fonck (1996), Clare acts as a model, mentor, and mirror for the Franciscan life. Her strength as an incarnational leader centers in her use of perception, contemplation and welcoming of the mystery of the incarnational bond between man and God (Ledoux, 2003). Clare does not patronize Agnes but rather "leads her gradually and carefully into contemplation of the mystery of the Incarnation (Van den Goorbergh & Zweerman, 2000, p. 184). Clare gently speaks of wisdom and prudence (3LAg 6, 31, 40), of understanding (3LAg 3), and of knowing (3LAg 4, 30, 31, 40).

Clare furthermore exhorts Agnes in the use of her own mind (3LAg12), underscored by a confidence made evident through that which is clear (3LAg21) and inarguable, focusing on what may be clearly seen (3LAg 4, 6, 7, 12). In contrast to what is seen and known, Clare also gently reminds Agnes of the dangers of the darkness (3LAg15) as noted by Van den Goorbergh & Zweerman (2000). This mindfulness is what Niewold (2006) posits as the incarnational consciousness necessary to the incarnational leader.

The Will. Emotion-fused thought is further represented in Clare's writing through her references to the will. Clare's will is neither expressed nor modeled as a self-induced control or force, but rather emanates from a deep desire and preference for herself and for Agnes (3LAg 2, 6, 34). Moreover, from the "figure of the divine substance" (3LAg13), Clare invites Agnes into the shared Incarnation through consideration (3LAg8) and contemplation (3LAg13). Fonck (1996) posits that contemplation involves all the senses as a means to intensify and develop the relationship between the human person and the persons of God. Chief among the sensory-aesthetic employed by Clare is that of the affect as is discussed in the next section.

The Affect. For Clare, the incarnation was not an abstraction (Ledoux, 2003) but a reality. *This reality began for Clare "with a powerful awareness of being called, being loved, being gifted" (Fonck, 1996, p. 3). Not only is this evident in Clare's life but Clare seems to acknowledge the same potential for the incarnational life in Agnes (3LAg6). From what appears to be an almost overwhelming experience of God's initiative and an overpowering sense of absolute emptiness without God, Clare makes extensive references to love and job (3LAg 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 22, 23, 30, and 40).*

Ledoux (2003) suggests Clare evidences "a permanent glowing proclamation of joy present everywhere, even in the presence of trial and solitude" (p. 63). Such joy is most evidenced in the pragmatic example of Jesus, posited by Niewold (2006) as the source of incarnational leadership and the source of Clare's joy and love for others. She is uncompromising in these things, perhaps because they emerge from the essence of her being which in western thought includes the idea of personality.

The Personality. Clare's letters to Agnes were not intended as moral guidance or even as overt direction in the way of the Franciscan life (Ledoux, 2003). Rather, Clare's writing reveals what Ledoux suggests is a rich and strong vision of human beings and of God. From an incarnational mutuality, Clare evidences humility (3LAg7, 25), respect (3LAg1), faithfulness (3LAg 21, 22), and deep hope (3LAg42).

Although exploration of the emotion-fused thought has added to the understanding of Clare's incarnational life and leadership, a sensory-aesthetic study would be incomplete without also considering the zones of self-expressive speech and purposeful action. These zones are discussed in the following sections.

Self-Expressive Speech

Self-expressive speech is, according to Robbins (1996a) represented by terms including the mouth, ears, tongue, lips, throat, teeth, jaws, and the activities of these organs such as speaking, hearing, to say, call, cry, question, sing, recount, tell, instruct, praise, listen to, blame, curse, swear, disobey, or turn a deaf ear to. Again, in a western culture, this zone would also cover the area we refer to as self-revelation through speech, communication with others, the human as listener who dialogues with others in a form of mutual self-unveiling, and so on (Robbins, 1996a).

Clare was “eager to awaken affection in others for the God of her heart” (Armstrong, 2006, p. 21) with deep sighs (3LAg4) and rejoicing (3LAg9, 10). In her dialogue with Agnes Clare engages the sense of taste by invoking the sweetness (3LAg14, 18) of relationship with the Three-fold divinity. In is from the mouth of God and His saint, that Agnes receives wisdom (3LAg6, 8). She actively enjoins Agnes to pray (3LAg42).

It is in the interactive dialogue, however, that Clare is most engaging and self-expressive. For example, speaking to Agnes directly (3LAg17, 23) she clarifies (3LAg29), urges (3LAg30), responds (3LAg30), advises and admonishes (3LAg31), and finally begs (3LAg40, 41). Clare is most self-revealing in her admiration (3LAg16) and praise (3LAg 41) for Agnes. The confidence and depth of Clare’s speech rises not from one who longs for an intimate relationship with the divine God, but from one who has possessed it already (3LAg6).

Purposeful Action

Purposeful action, according to Robbins (1996a) deals with the hands, feet, arms, fingers, legs, and the activities of these organs such as doing, acting, accomplishing, executing, intervening, touching, walking, standing, or sitting. In a western culture, this body zone would also cover the area of outward human behaviour, all external activity, and human actions upon the world of persons and things (Robbins). In the Third Letter to Agnes, it would first appear that Clare’s focus is directed to the purposeful action of fasting. However, closer exploration reveals Clare’s firm resolve and intention for the fundamental purposes.

Armstrong (2006) has described in Clare a “tenacity to depend on an all-loving, provident God” (p. 20). Clare refers to strong arms (3LAg7) that support the weak (3LAg8), that hold (3LAg19) and carry (3LAg18, 19 24, 25). Such an all-loving God cannot be contained by the heavens (3LAg18, 22) and yet may be possessed by the faithful soul (3LAg6, 26). From that firm resolve to trust the incarnational relationship, Clare speaks of purposeful actions that can only lead to an intimate union with the Holy.

Although at first glance Clare was seemingly motivated to write her Third Letter to Agnes in response to confusion around fasting, Van den Goorbergh and Zweerman (2000) posit the ascetic section dealing with the concerns on fasting was necessarily built from the first, mystical section. In fact, Clare gives the greater part of her letter to a focus on what she must have considered to be the essential actions toward the purpose of an incarnational reality.

First, Clare was zealously devoted to the Holy and affirmed Agnes’ devotion as “you have advanced and undertaken” (3LAg3, 40), “following in the footsteps” (3LAg4, 25), have “taken hold” (3LAg7), come to him, dwell (3LAg23), and do well (3LAg42). It is with urgency that Clare employs an imperative mood, to move Agnes into taking her place at home in his Love (3LAg12, 13).

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, what is essential to Clare is evidenced as she speaks of the transformation from the bitter to the sweet (3LAg10) as a result of change (3LAg30) and transformation (3LAg13) that occur “only within a relationship of love” (Van den Goorbergh &

Zweerman, 2000, p. 182). Love is used by Clare in the active mode, as a choice between all or nothing (Van den Goorbergh & Zweerman). According to Lainati (1994) Clare became free, empty, open, available, and was incarnationally overflowing with God's joy "to fill the hearts of friends with the hidden sweetness" (p. 94).

It is from this place of incarnationality that Clare finally speaks of the purposeful action of fasting which must "affirm the forces of wisdom, longing and strength, not undermine them" (Lainati, 1994, p. 205). The act of fasting is to be as an offer, a service, a sacrifice (3LAg41) but one that is to be seasoned (3LAg41) and tempered for effectiveness and according to individual need. Mueller (2001) notes Clare's perspective on fasting served as a means to an end but was not essential to the Damianite lifestyle (3LAg33, 34, 35).

Fonck (1996) suggests the community of the Poor Clares is "meant to be a visible support system to sustain and complement the efforts of all the members in striving to attain a meaningful relationship with Christ" (p. 51). This relationship is clearly evidenced in 3LAg4. There are other aspects, however, of the imperative for this community reflected in the sensory-aesthetics painted by Clare as she references the treacheries of the deceitful (3LAg15, 20, 27), the wicked, (3LAg22) arrogant and prideful (3LAg6, 20 28), the crafty, infatuated, and vane (3LAg6), and finally the indiscrete (3LAg40). It is these of the unfaithful world who will be forgotten (3LAg28) evoking sadness (3LAg11), dread (3LAg20), doubt (3LAg25) and who are to be completely ignored lest they ensnare the faithful (3LAg15).

Conclusion

While Bekker (2005) suggests Clare's leadership embodies the kenotic mysticism of servant leadership, incarnational leadership as described by Niewold (2006) has provided another platform through which the inner texture of Clare's writings may be explored. According to Armstrong and Brady (1982) Clare's incarnational desire was "to guide another in the pursuit of evangelical perfection and a profound poverty" (p. 189). Furthermore, Carney (1993) proposes Clare did not rest in a pattern of imitation, but was instead "open and docile to the action of the Holy Spirit" (p. 239). Incarnational communion with the Spirit was the true source of Clare's renewal and adaptation of the religious life; her perception was that she received daily as a freely given gift the presence of the Holy Spirit in a special vocation (Carney).

Niewold (2006) has suggested the Christian presence in the world is increasingly perceived as marginal and irrelevant. The need is great for Christians living out the depth of their faith, filled like Clare with all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:18-19). Niewold stresses incarnationalism must not be constructed as a new form of individualism; instead, the incarnational leader understands self as existing through mind, body, and spirit in relationship with God and with others.

Jesus' life, as Clare's pattern for life, emphasizes the cost of discipleship. An incarnational life, however, depends on participation with the Holy Spirit's power, emphasizing God's grace and victory in Christ (Niewold). Clare's life and leadership evidence not just a simple imitation of being like

Jesus but what Niewold references as the mystery of an innate belief that Jesus is like me. This may be the most effective life and leadership we are able to offer in our time, when many will believe only in the Jesus Christ incarnated in me (Niewold).

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Appendix A

Clare's Third Letter to Agnes (3LAg – 1283)*

1. 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: 2. Clare, the most lowly and unworthy handmaid of Christ and servant of the Poor Ladies: the joys of redemption in *the Author of salvation (Hebrews 2:10)* and every good thing that can be desired.

3. 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 (*cf. Philippians 3:14*). 4. And I sigh with such happiness in the Lord because I know you see that you make up most wonderfully what is lacking both in me and in the other sisters in following the footprints of the poor and humble Jesus Christ.

5. I can rejoice truly – and no one can rob me of such joy – 6. 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.

7. 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* and in the hearts of men (*cf. Matthew 13:44*), with which you have purchased that field of Him by Whom all things have been made from nothing. 8. And, to use the words of the Apostle himself in their proper sense, I consider you a *co-worker of God Himself (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:9; Romans 16:3)* and a support of the weak members of His ineffable Body. 9. Who is there then who would not encourage me to rejoice over such marvelous joys?

10. Therefore, dearly beloved, may you too *always rejoice in the Lord (Philippians 4:4)*. 11. 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!

12. Place your mind before the mirror of eternity!

Place your soul in *the brilliance of glory! (cf. Hebrews 1:3)*.

13. Place your heart in the *figure of the divine substance! (cf. Hebrews 1:3)*

And *transform* your whole being *into the image* of the Godhead

Itself through contemplation! (*cf. 2 Corinthians 3:18*).

14. So that you too may feel what His friends feel

as they taste *the hidden sweetness (cf. Psalms 30:20)*

which God Himself has reserved from the beginning

for those who love Him.

15. 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. 16. His beauty the

sun and moon admire; and of His gifts there is no limit in abundance, preciousness, and magnitude.

17. 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. 18. Cling to His most sweet Mother who carried a Son Whom the heavens could not contain; 19. and yet she carried Him in the little enclosure of her holy womb and held Him on her virginal lap.

20. 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? 21. 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? 22. 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. 23. [He Who is] the Truth has said: *Whoever loves me will be loved by My Father, and I too shall love him, and We shall come to him and make our dwelling place with Him (John 14:21).*

24. Therefore, as the glorious Virgin of virgins carried [Christ] materially in her body, 25. you too, by *following in His footprints (cf. 1 Peter 2:21)*, especially [those] of poverty and humility, can, without any doubt, always carry Him spiritually in your chaste and virginal body. 26. And you will hold Him by Whom you and *all thing are held together (cf. Wisdom 1:7; Colossians 1:17)*, [thus] possessing that which, in comparison with the other transitory possessions of this world, you will possess more securely. 27. How many kings and queens of this world let themselves be deceived! 28. 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!

29. Now concerning those matters which you have asked me to clarify for you: 30. 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.

31. 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, 32. none of us who are healthy and strong should eat anything other than Lenten fare, either on ferial days or on feast days. 33. Thus, we must fast every day except Sundays and the Nativity of the Lord, on which days we may have two meals. 34. And on ordinary Thursdays everyone may do as she wishes, so that she who does not wish to fast is not obliged. 35. However, we who are well should fast every day except on Sundays and on Christmas.

38. *But our flesh is not bronze nor is our strength that of stone (Job 6:12).* 39. No, we are frail and inclined to every bodily weakness! 40. 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. 41. And I beg you in the Lord to praise the Lord by your very life, to offer to the Lord your *reasonable service (Romans 12:1)*, and your *sacrifice always seasoned with salt (Leviticus 2:13).*

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

* as translated by Armstrong, R. J. & Brady, I. C. (1982). *Francis and Clare. The Complete Works*. New York: Paulist Press. Italics indicate quotes from Scripture as referenced by Armstrong and Brady.