



Clare of Assisi: Foot-Washing Leadership

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of books published about leadership styles. We have seen the meteoric rise in popularity of Stephen Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* and now his *Principle-Centered Leadership* is fast becoming a best-seller. John C. Maxwell offers readers basic insights into various issues surrounding leadership in his *Leadership 101: What Every Leader Needs to Know*; while Rudolph W. Giuliani utilized his experience of being mayor of New York and produced his memoir-like volume, *Leadership*. These publications and many others on the development of leadership styles are indicative of a search for more collaborative and participative models of leadership. I think intuitively we know something is just not right. The model of the ruthless, capitalist CEO, the lone ranger at the top of the heap is a model that is being called into question by more than a few thinking people. Yet even the best of these volumes focus on skills and techniques without giving attention to the transformation of the one who is in leadership.

Are leadership abilities inborn? Is leadership just a matter of learning a few techniques? Is the bottom line of every leadership style simply getting a job done? From a Christian perspective, good leadership requires more than techniques or skills. Christian leadership calls for something much deeper and much more challenging. It is for this deeper perspective that we turn to the medieval woman, Clare of Assisi.

Who is Clare of Assisi?

The eldest daughter of Favarone di Offreduccio and his wife, Ortulana, was born in 1193-94, the fulfillment of a promise Ortulana had heard some months before as she was praying in a nearby church: "Do not be afraid, woman, for you will give birth in safety to a light which will give light more clearly than light itself" (LCI 2:10). Her daughter, Chiara, the clear or bright one whom history knows as Clare of Assisi was born a healthy, beautiful child who would grow into an extraordinary woman of faith. The dates of her birth and death are facts of history. It is her relationship with Christ and the grace of transformation within her that merits our attention. It is this kind of reflection that will help us discover the motivation for and the style of her leadership. Even at an early age, Clare manifested an openness of heart that allowed the Holy Spirit to cultivate many gifts of grace within her. Her cooperation in this enterprise of faith is testified to by her medieval biographer who wrote:

From the mouth of her mother she first received with a docile heart the fundamentals of the faith and, with the Spirit inflaming and molding her interiorly, she became known as most pure vessel, a vessel of graces (LCI 3:2).

These gifts of the Holy Spirit were revealed in concrete acts of kindness toward poor people and Clare learned quickly that love needed to be manifested in deeds:

She freely stretched out her hand to the poor and satisfied the needs of many out of the abundance of her house. In order that her sacrifice would be more pleasing to God, she would deprive her own body of delicate foods and sending them secretly through intermediaries, she would nourish the bodies of the poor (LCI 3:4).

In the good soil of her heart, the Lord planted the seeds of his love. Prayer, fasting and continued almsgiving, nourished these seeds. Her reputation for compassion and generosity was known throughout Assisi. Though this was expected of a person of her social station, Clare, it seems, brought a tenderness and warmth to her almsgiving, that did not go unnoticed. These are traits she must have learned from her mother who led a small number of women friends in doing works of mercy to benefit poor people. Marco Bartoli commented that Ortulana's works of mercy and her good deeds in the service of the poorest were a concrete way of leaving the confines of the house, seeking interests in the life of the town where poverty and mendicancy were present to an extent never seen in preceding generations (Bartoli 1993:16). Belonging to Assisi's nobility allowed the Offreduccio family to provide tutors to see to Clare's education. Social relationships provided a network in which Clare was exposed to cultural experiences not open to those in lower economic strata. Clare was imbued with the social graces and politically correct behavior of her times, but grace supplied compassion and generosity in equal measure and these made her a very warm and gracious personality who was sensitive to the needs of others (Lainati 1994:11).

The Offreduccio family was not without their difficulties. In 1202 when the Battle of Collestrada was raging between Assisi and Perugia Favarone, like most feudal lords, took his family to stay in Perugia at the home of his eldest brother, Monaldo. They remained there until around 1205-06. By the time the family returned to Assisi the commune was buzzing with talk of Francesco, (Francis of Assisi), the son of Pietro Bernardone who had gone off to become a knight, but instead returned and started behaving in a most unusual manner. This first born son of one of Assisi's richest cloth merchants had taken up a life of preaching and prayer. To make matters worse some of the commune's finest young men, among them Clare's cousin Rufino, were joining him.

From the testimony of Clare's youngest sister, Beatrice, we know that Francis sought out Clare because of her holiness and kindness to the poor for which she was known among the people of Assisi (PC 12:2). Eventually, probably around 1210-11, after hearing Francis preach in the Cathedral of San Rufino, Clare met him. Over the course of a year or more, they arranged to meet so that Clare could learn more about Francis and his community. During these meetings Clare revealed her desire to share in Francis's vision of translating the Gospel into a concrete way of life. This communion of hearts and minds sparked in both of them a fire that inflamed their spirits until the end of their lives. When all things were in readiness, Clare left her family's home on the night of March 18, 1212. Francis first took her to the Benedictine Monastery of San Paolo de Abbadesse in Bastia because it had the privilege of papal sanctuary. Both Francis and Clare knew that the Offreduccio family would be enraged when they realized Clare had left home. They were right. Clare's uncles and other relatives stormed the monastery with the intention of bringing her back, but they were unsuccessful. During her time with the Benedictines Clare took on the duties of a servant. Clare, though, was not attracted to the Benedictine way of life and after a short time, Clare took leave of the sisters. It seems that the mystic rushes of her heart were stifled in the vastness and wealth of the monastery. She then moved to San't Angelo di Panzo, a community of Beguines.

Through this community, Clare got in touch with one of the growing number of new religious movements of women that was started in the first quarter of the thirteenth century. These women sought to live in poverty, chastity and service to others, but they wanted to remain as laywomen, not religious. It was while Clare was at San't Angelo's that her sister, Catherine (Agnes of Assisi), joined her. Clare's medieval biographer records the event: Sixteen days after the conversion of Clare, Agnes, inspired by the divine spirit, ran to her sister, revealed the secret of her will, and told her that she wished to serve God completely. Embracing her with joy, Clare said: 'I thank God, most sweet sister, that He has heard my concern for you' (LCI 24).

The family was once again enraged when they found out that a second Offreduccio daughter had fled from home. The male members of the family hurried off in search of Agnes and found her with Clare. Without any protection, the two sisters were at the mercy of their relatives. It was only through Clare's prayer that the men failed to take Agnes with them. The Lord had something else in mind for the two Offreduccio sisters and it was now time for his plan to be realized.

With the permission of Bishop Guido, Francis took Clare and Agnes to San Damiano where they began a community under the gaze of Christ who in that same place urged Francis to rebuild the church. It is no coincidence that it was in this small, poor and rustic place Clare's spirit experienced a new sense of freedom and peace. She and her sister were ready to share in the mission of rebuilding the church.

Life at San Damiano

In a short time the walls of San Damiano began to ring with the sound of a community dedicated to the praise of God and intercession for the needs of all God's people. Among the early members were Clare's friends, but soon enough women from some of the most influential families in Assisi joined the community. Francis gave the small community a short Form of Life that Clare included within her Form of Life:

Because by divine inspiration you have made yourselves daughters and handmaids of the most High, most Exalted King, the heavenly Father, and have taken the Holy Spirit as your spouse, choosing to live according to the perfection of the holy Gospel, I resolve and promise for myself and for my brothers always to have the same loving care and special solicitude for you as for them (FLCI 6:3-4).

Clare treasured these words in her heart. They were the assurance that Francis's fraternity and her community would be bound together forever. Both groups were called to live the Gospel, but in different ways.

Clare included another very important text from Francis in chapter six of her Form of Life. Francis saw that the vision of Gospel life that he and Clare espoused was a challenging way to live. He had experienced the struggle to keep this vision alive among his own brothers. Perhaps this is the reason why shortly before his death he took special care to write to the sisters again about their vocation.

I, little brother Francis, wish to follow the life and poverty of our most high Lord Jesus Christ and of His most holy Mother and to persevere in this until the end; and I ask you, my ladies, and I give you my advice that you live always in this most holy life and poverty. And keep careful watch that you never depart from this by reason or advice of anyone (FLCI 6:7-9).

In 1215, at Francis's insistence, Clare assumed the leadership of the community at San Damiano as abbess, but not without a struggle. She knew the images that the very title of abbess conjured up in the minds of medieval people. However, she understood leadership in a very different way. She was able to carve out her unique style of leadership, one that was modeled on Jesus' own. Clare led her community until her death in 1253.

The Matrix of Clare's Leadership

The matrix of Clare's leadership style has three components. It is rooted in the Clare's appreciation for the mystery of the Incarnation, her embrace of the kenotic Christ, and her spirit of service. All three of these are part of her spirituality and related to her religious experience. She gave them concrete expression in her service to the community as abbess.

Living the Incarnation

Given the context of the ecclesial and monastic milieu in which Clare grew up it is remarkable that she had such a thoroughly biblical spirituality. Her writings manifest what today is called mysticism of the historical event. Sergius Wroblewski explains:

In this type of consciousness one recalls a significant even in the past, enters into its drama and draws from it a spiritual energy, eventually moving the event towards union with God...In this form of prayer, one imagines the physical setting of the event—the place, the persons, the circumstances. However, one does not remain a detached spectator, but enters into the even as an actor in the drama, singing with the angels and worshipping the infant with the shepherds. This immersion in the event opens up its spiritual meaning...It is mystical because it provides a path to another form of transcendence, namely contact with God. Great religious events are seen as modes of God's manifestation to us and of our union with God (Wroblewski 1998:9-10).

This kind of mysticism is evidenced in Clare's response to the meditation on the birth of Jesus. Drawn out of herself in love and in awe she wrote:

O marvelous humility! O astonishing poverty! The King of angels, the Lord of heaven and earth, is laid in a manger (4LAg 20)!

For Clare, Christ's self-emptying did not begin on Calvary, but at Bethlehem at the Incarnation. The kenotic element of the Incarnation seized Clare's imagination and led her to marvel at the humility of God. For her, it was a sheer miracle of grace and obedience to the will of the Father that led Jesus to hide his divinity and take on the poverty of humanity. It was Clare's openness to the wonderful generosity of God that led her to union with Christ. Wroblewski noted:

According to Clare, for this kind of contemplation of an historical event to be effective two conditions are required. One is poverty: we cannot place our minds, our souls or our hearts in the event if they are absorbed with other things. For Clare, poverty brought perfect detachment that allowed her to direct her attention, her devotion, her love, her will wherever the Spirit of the Lord summoned. Christian contemplatives have always taught that poverty of spirit led to unitive prayer, prayer so focused and so deep that all barriers between oneself and God vanish...The second condition is the intention to imitate Christ, to put on his mind, to open oneself to his virtues. Contemplation should lead to an intended transformation (Wroblewski 1998:12-13).

Clare's was a practical mysticism by which she expected to be changed into the likeness of her Beloved. For this reason, she urged Agnes of Prague to gaze, consider, and contemplate Christ while desiring to imitate him. The fourth dimension, to imitate Christ, is echoed in Clare's advice to the Bohemian princess:

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, through contemplation, transform your entire being into the image of the Godhead itself (3LAg 12-13).

The mimetic nature of Clare's contemplation of Christ's self-emptying in the Incarnation led her to enact this self-emptying in her own life. Meditation was to lead to personal transformation and changes in one's attitudes and behavior. Related to Clare's profound appreciation of the Incarnation is her experience of union with the Poor Christ. It is this second element in the matrix of her style of Christian leadership that we turn to now.

Embracing the Poor Christ

Clare's letters to Agnes of Prague, her Testament, information provided by the witnesses in her canonization process and her medieval biography give us a sense of her relationship with Christ. One thing is beyond doubt and that is that she was in love with Christ. He had captivated her heart, and more than two decades after coming to San Damiano, she described her Beloved as one

Whose strength is more robust, generosity more lofty, Whose appearance is more handsome, love more courteous, and every kindness more refined, Whose embrace already holds you; who as adorned Your breast with precious stones, placed priceless pearls on Your ears, surrounded You completely with blossoms of springtime and sparkling gems and placed on Your head a golden crown as a sign of Your holiness (1LAg 9-11).

Clare's description of Christ is both mystical and ecstatic. This text flows out of the abundance of her heart (Karecki 1995:34). She wrote out of the truth of her experience and advised Agnes to draw near to the Lord: "As a poor virgin embrace the poor Christ" (2LAg 18).

In the act of embracing Clare let go of everything that would impede her from resting in the arms of her Beloved; hence the role of poverty as a form of liberation. The tenderness of that embrace made her aware of manifold gifts of grace that Christ bestowed on her; hence the role of humility in helping her to see the truth of herself before God. Johannes Metz, in his book, *Poverty of Spirit*, noted that poverty and humility are the mark of every loving encounter with a human being. He wrote:

Every stirring of genuine love makes us poor. It dominates the whole human person, makes absolute claims upon us and thus subverts all extra-human assurances of security. The true lover must be unprotected and give of himself or herself without reservation or question; and must display lifelong fidelity (Metz 1998:43).

With full recognition of her poverty before God in humility, she clung to the Lord. She who knew the truth of her own poverty fell madly in love with the Poor Christ and in lovingly embracing Christ she became one with him and her heart began to beat with his in rhythmic union. Beatrice Bruteau names this an I-I relationship and contends that: The intention of the Lover is to enter into the subjectivity of the Beloved in an I-I relationship, the most intimate and thorough of all interpersonal communions (Bruteau 1993:111).

The embrace of the Poor Christ was not something stiff or oppressive. It was more like the embrace of dancers secure, lithesome and graceful. Clare and Christ moved in the rhythmic steps of the dance of kenosis. In this dance Christ led the way in the sometimes graceful, sometimes rigorous movements of self-emptying.

It was, in the words of Metz (1998:45), “an immersion in transcendence.” Clare chose to follow in the footprints of the Poor Christ and in doing so; she became enriched through his poverty. She shared with Agnes her experience of being enriched by Christ using the image of commercium: “What a great and praiseworthy exchange: to receive the hundred-fold in place of one, and to possess a blessed eternal life” (ILAg 30).

Union with the Poor Christ brought about Clare’s own transformation. She became more and more like the One she loved. As her heart beat in synchronization with his everything about Clare’s life began to mirror Christ’s. She had learned all the necessary steps and movements in the dance of kenosis in the embrace of the kenotic Christ. We now turn to the third element that shaped the matrix of Clare’s leadership style: service.

Clare as Foot-Washer

There is perhaps no more dramatic scene in the Gospels apart from the Passion, than that of the washing of the feet of the apostles in John 13. The question Jesus posed to the apostles in verse 13, “Do you understand what I have done to you?” was one that Clare was able to answer with conviction. She spent herself in the service of her sisters and was an example of all that was embodied in the image of Jesus as foot-washer. This was indeed the fundamental image that shaped Clare’s sense of what it meant to be in leadership.

Power relationships exist within every community and organization. Today we are aware of the dynamics of power and how it can be used to create interdependence and mature relationships or how it can be abused to foster relationships of dependence and/or control. From the testimony given by the witnesses for Clare’s canonization, what we find is evidence of an enabling leader who was secure enough in her own gifts to facilitate the development of those of others while also delighting in them. She was secure and competent and because of this she a clear sense of her identity before God. She also knew that everything came to her by way of God’s gifts and because of this she could go out of herself in love to others.

Clare’s healthy sense of identity and her clear grasp of the form of Gospel life God had called her enabled her to lead with decisiveness and humility. Is this a contradiction? Not really. She had placed all her trust in the Lord and in poverty of spirit simply exercised her leadership following the example of Jesus. She was not suffering from a bad self-image so her decision to model her leadership on that of Jesus’ own came out of the strength of her beliefs and convictions and was not detrimental to her unique personality. The courage it took to leave her home, the radical Gospel life she and the community at San Damiano shaped and her continuing struggle for the approval of her Form of Life provide ample evidence of her psychological and spiritual strength. Nevertheless, she knew how to yield to grace and she did so with great dignity and decorum.

Metz (1998:25), in another context, captured, in essence, what I think Clare would have affirmed: “We are all members of a species that is not sufficient unto itself.” Metz continues:

The fulfilled ones are the ones who dare to forget themselves and offer up their heart...To be able to surrender oneself and become “poor” is, in biblical theology, to be with God, to find one’s hidden nature in God; in short, it is “heaven” (1998:32).

This is what Clare was able to do and she did so with extraordinary grace because her surrender was a response made in love.

She did not simply take care of the sisters through loving acts of self-giving; she took great care for the greatest gift that each of them received from the Lord: their vocation. We learn of this from her Testament:

Among the other gifts that we have received and continue to receive from our magnanimous Father of mercies and for which we must express the deepest thanks to our glorious God, there is our vocation....(TestCI 2-3).

This, I would contend, is Clare's most significant contribution to developing a style of leadership that was faithful to the Gospel and to the particular way of living the Gospel to which she and the sisters were called. Fidelity to the charism was of the greatest importance if the community was to enrich the church.

Clare attended to the daily tasks of leading a contemplative community of women. Her biographer gives us a clear indication of her willingness to serve the members of the community:

Rarely would she give an order, instead she would do things spontaneously, preferring rather to do things herself than to order her sisters. She herself washed the commodes of the sick; her herself, with that noble spirit of hers, cleansed them not running away from their filth nor shrinking from their stench. She frequently and reverently washed the feet of the serving sisters who returned from outside and, after washing them kissed them (LCI 12:7-9).

Clare's foot-washing ministry became the central metaphor for her humility and service because it gives expression to her whole manner of life (Blastic 1993:31). In her Testament Clare gave voice to her expectation that the abbesses who would succeed her would carry out their duties in this same spirit.

I also beg that sister who will be in an office of the sisters to strive to exceed the others more by her virtues and holy life than by her office, so that, stimulated by her example, they obey her not so much because of her office as because of love (TestCI 61-62).

Not only Clare, but also all the members of the community were to be foot-washers, serving one another generously and in a spirit of humility after the example, not of Clare only, but of THE foot-washer par excellence, Jesus.

Implications for Leadership Today

What can we learn from this medieval woman about leadership? Are her life and message applicable in other situations? Can she speak to people of the 21st century? My answer is a resounding "yes" if we are willing to do the inner work that gives shape to a style of leadership that mirrors Jesus' own.

Too often, we give verbal credence to a belief in the Incarnation without considering the ramifications of this radical sign of God's presence everywhere in the world. In human history, everything changed because of the Incarnation. Jesus came to reveal God's love for us and did so in a most striking and unexpected way: as a baby and in poverty! Clare marveled at this and so must we if we are to learn to accept our own poverty.

Accepting who we are, with our gifts and limitations signals to others our willingness to accept them. Such an approach enables people to work together to enrich the whole community. It enables us to see Christ present in all the situations that present themselves in our communities or work situations, the enjoyable and the stressful.

Clare's embrace of the Poor Christ is a related element because we cannot see Christ present in people and situations unless we know him and something about how he reveals himself. Every Christian leader needs to give time to cultivating his/her own relationship with Christ. We need to be open to Christ's transforming love. No self-help program or positive thinking method can do it; only Christ's love can bring about change in us. This, of course, does not happen like magic. We need to cooperate with the grace of transformation, yielding to the work of the Spirit within us. If we are not serious about learning to dance with the Lord, it will not happen. It takes discipline and humility to embrace Christ in this dance of life. When we are serious about being in relationship with the Lord, we will find that other relationships will come into focus more clearly. If we are serious about our own transformation, we will learn how Christian leadership is fundamentally always an act of foot-washing.

In order to be an effective foot-washer a leader must be convinced of the vision, mission and fundamental values of his/her organization or community. Clare was totally committed to the vision of Gospel life that she had fashioned with Francis and then implemented with the sisters at San Damiano. Without this kind of commitment, the community would have floundered and compromised its mission of glorifying God through their manner of life (TestCI 13-14). Being faithful to the original vision is the first kind most essential form of service a leader can give.

The leader who is serious about foot-washing needs to pay attention to the development of the gifts of those s/he is working with. A community or organization will only prosper if individual gifts are developed for the common good and put at the service of the mission of the group. Without a clear focus, there can be growth, but it will not be consistent with the original purpose for which the group was founded.

A foot-washing leader will also be concerned about individual members of the organization. There is no substitute for ongoing attention to the needs of others.

We find we have abundance of being and value, and the more we share it with all others, the more we have, for our root-being as person is to be lover; therefore, the more we love, the more we are. The value does not come from being scarce but from being abundant and being shared (Bruteau 1993:128).

The leader who gives of himself/herself out of love, not compulsion will find that this manner of self-giving is replenishment for the heart. "Take away the damming walls of ego-defense, and the fountain of love will spring forth naturally and pour out without restraint (Bruteau 1993:130). It is not the hard-nosed CEO or callous manager that is ultimately successful, but the foot-washing leader who has not only learned to dance with the Lord, but has invited others into the circle dance of life.

Abbreviations of Primary Sources

1LAg	The First Letter to Agnes of Prague
2LAg	The Second Letter to Agnes of Prague
3LAg	The Third Letter to Agnes of Prague
4LAg	The Fourth Letter to Agnes of Prague

FLCI	The Form of Life
LCI	The Legend of Saint Clare
PC	The Acts of the Process of Canonization
TestCI	The Testament

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