

Kenotic Mysticism and Servant Leadership in the letters of Clare of Assisi to Agnes of Prague

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This paper explores the spirituality and leadership of Clare of Assisi in the letters to Agnes of Prague. Successive repetitive-progressive pattern analysis of the letters to Agnes of Prague places Clare within the domain of servant leader and identifies her leadership values as congruent to Patterson's theoretical model of servant leadership. Clare's spirituality is one of appropriation of the kenosis of Jesus Christ. Clare of Assisi links her kenotic mysticism with her practice of servant leadership in an inter-dependant dynamic system of personal and communal transformation through radical self-emptying.

The aim of this paper is to explore the spirituality and leadership of Clare of Assisi as expressed in the letters to Agnes of Prague within the matrix of servant leadership theory and kenotic mysticism by employing the interpretative dynamics of repetitive-progressive texture analysis of socio-rhetorical criticism. Clare's writings are rich in theology and spirituality, and in the light of the constraints of this study, the focus is firmly placed on the kenotic and leadership dynamics in the letters to Agnes of Prague.

Greenleaf's (1998:18-19) seminal work on servant leadership defines the concept as follows:

"The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. He or she is sharply different from the person who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions."

Clare's absolute commitment to poverty, her refusal to accept the markings and privileges of the religious temporal powers of her time and her vocation of service, place her within the domain of servant leader. Patterson (2003:2), building on Greenleaf's definition describes servant leadership as a virtuous theory comprising of seven virtuous constructs. These virtues are (a) agapao love, (b) humility, (c) altruism, (d) vision, (e) trust, (f) empowerment and (g) service. Successive repetitive-progressive texture analysis of Clare's letters to Agnes identifies these virtues as integral to her vision and ideology.

Ledoux (1997:27) defines Christian mysticism as, "...the experience of the interior and unifying encounter with the Divine Infinite that is the foundation of the Divine Being and of all existence." Clare's mysticism has been described as (a) profoundly Christological (Kourie 1993:125), (b) affectionate (Mueller 2003:103), (c) scriptural (Kourie 1993:126), (d) theological (Ledoux 1997:25), (e) incarnational (Kourie 1993:125) and (f) kenotic (Karecki 2000B:2). Clare's practice of voluntary poverty is rooted in the desire to imitate the kenosis (self-emptying) of Christ (Teresa 1995:109) as expressed within the Christological hymn of Philippians 2:5-11

(Kourie 1993:126). Kenosis in Franciscan theology (Cronin 1992:1) is seen as a “...*resolute divesting of the person of every claim of self interest so as to be ready to live the Gospel of Christ in every aspect of living, freed from the dictates of personal preference.*” Clare’s voluntary divesting of power, prestige and possessions find its theological context in her deep desire to follow in the footsteps of the kenotic Christ who emptied Himself and embraced poverty for the sake of others. Kourie (1993:124) describes Clare’s commitment to radical poverty as transformational: “...*Clare’s practice of poverty had as its aim the radical transformation of the person, the abolition of a narrow selfhood and the silencing of the all too natural tendency toward fragmentation and purely functional consciousness.*” The kenotic mysticism of Clare leads to human authentication (Kourie 1993:125) that allows for the leader to enter into the world of followers and focus on their humanity in the pursuit of service.

Clare of Assisi and Agnes of Prague

Clare of Assisi (1193/4-1253) was the first female leader in the history of Christendom to write a religious rule sanctioned by pontifical approval (Carney 1993:19). Imbued with the evangelical vision she received from the preaching of Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) she rejected the prestige and privileges that her aristocratic family offered and instead opted for life of religious service and in doing so constructed a new kind of monastic life which is described by Karecki and Wroblewski (2003A:3) as, “...*an enclosed contemplative life in an urban setting with highest poverty.*” The enclosed community of sisters that Clare founded at San Damiano was characterized, amongst other attributes, by a (a) contemplative focus on Christ (Karecki and Wroblewski 2000B:17), (b) the primacy of the Bible as the Word of God (Karecki and Wroblewski 2000C:13), (c) a counter-cultural ideology (Karecki and Wroblewski 2001:15), (d) a preferential option for the poor (Teresa 1995:7), (e) an appreciation for mission (Karecki and Wroblewski 2001:13), (f) charismatic healings (Duw 1992:14) and (g) service to others (Karecki and Wroblewski 2001:10). The religious community that Clare started quickly spread around the rest of Italy, Europe and the world. The Poor Clares (as the order is known today) boasts, almost 800 years later, over 20 000 active members in 76 countries.

Agnes of Prague (1203-1282) was the daughter of King Přemysl Ottokar I and Queen Constance of Bohemia (Karecki and Wroblewski 2003:6). Several high-level suitors were proposed for Agnes at a young age (Henry VII of Germany and Henry III of England were two of these). Agnes was finally betrothed to the Emperor Frederick II (Mueller 2003: xvii). Influenced by the preaching of the missionary brothers of Francis, whom she heard preaching in 1232 (Armstrong and Brady 1982:189), she rejected the alliance (De Robeck 1954:55) and instead used her royal dowry to build a hospital, a monastery for women and a small convent for friars that would support the sisters (Mueller 2003:xviii). Agnes herself joined the monastery that she build and requested sisters who followed the form of life of Clare’s community in San Damiano (Mueller 2003: xviii). Agnes supported Clare in her pursuit of contemplative poverty and sought the same privilege of poverty from Pope Gregory IX that Agnes received (Karecki and Wroblewski 2003A:11). Clare wrote four letters to Agnes with the purpose to guide and lead her in her commitment to the Franciscan ideal and to Christ (Armstrong and Brady 1982: 189-206). These letters were lost to the modern scholars until 1915, when Walter Seton discovered them in a 14th century manuscript (Karecki and Wroblewski 2003B:5). Repetitive-progressive texture analysis of the letters to Agnes to Prague opens new avenues in the reading of these texts and provides contemporary readers and scholars with an opportunity to further explore the leadership and spirituality of Clare of Assisi.

Socio-rhetorical criticism

Repetitive-progressive pattern analysis is part of a larger approach to the interpretation of texts known as socio-rhetorical criticism. Robbins proposes a multi-dimensional approach to the analysis of texts and names it socio-rhetorical criticism (1999:1). Robbins (1999:1) writes:

“...rather than being another method for interpreting texts, socio-rhetorical interpretation is an interpretive analytical approach that evaluates and reorients its strategies as it engages in multi-faceted dialogue with the texts and other phenomena that come within its purview. The approach does not claim to be comprehensive. Rather, the claim is that the approach uses the insights of sociolinguistics, semiotics and ethnography in an interactionist philosophical mode that sets ancient, modern and post-modern systems of thought in energetic dialogue with one another.”

Robbins (1991) attempts to integrate all the recent developments in linguistic, social and cultural studies in a highly programmed methodology that has as purpose to not only enlarge our understanding of the social and cultural dimensions of the text, but also to facilitate new avenues of exploration in textual interpretation such as organizational leadership. It is important to note that as much as socio-rhetorical criticism is a new approach to text analysis; it is based on and incorporates the accomplishments of past scholars working in varied fields, ranging from textual analysis, linguistic studies, sociology, anthropology and cultural observations (Gowler 1999:1). This above-mentioned aspect of socio-rhetorical criticism has made it difficult to formulate and define this new approach. Gowler (1999:1) comments:

"...socio-rhetorical criticism is not a 'methodology' in the sense that it becomes an interpretive matrix imposed upon biblical texts like a strait-jacket. Socio-rhetorical criticism, so far, developed over a period of 20 years in which Vernon Robbins and others wrestled with biblical texts, not imposing a method but investigating and adapting this approach to the complexities of those texts."

This new integrated approach to textual analysis introduces a certain paradigm shift in the way one perceives, understands and uses texts. Instead of seeing a text as a mere window through which one perceives meaning, one now focuses on the several layers or textures within the text as the key to interpretation. Robbins (1999:1) writes:

"...guided by the metaphor of a text as a tapestry rather than a site of windows and mirrors, socio-rhetorical interpretation has begun to focus not only on multiple textures of a text but also on multiple discourses that interweave with one another within those textures. The interweaving of multiple textures and discourses within a text creates an environment in which signification, meanings and meaning effects interact with one another in ways that no one method can display. Only an approach that is highly programmatic, complexly variegated and readily adaptable can begin to engage and exhibit the rich world that texts bring into the life of humans as they live, work, struggle, suffer, die, celebrate and commemorate together."

Socio-rhetorical analysis of ancient texts has not only opened a variety of new avenues for the textual, social and cultural analysis of text, but it has also provided us with a new context for multi-disciplinary exchange and discussion on the meaning, effect and use of texts (Gowler 1999:12). In order to structure his integrated approach to textual analysis, Robbins proposes five broad categories of investigation (1996a, 1996b):

- The **Inner texture** of the text, which explore the inner textual texture of the text.
- The **Intertexture** of the text, which explores the intertextual texture of text.
- The **Social and cultural texture** of the text, which explore the social and cultural dimensions of the text.
- The **Ideological texture** of the text, exploring the ideological inner dynamics of the text.
- The **Sacred texture** of the text.

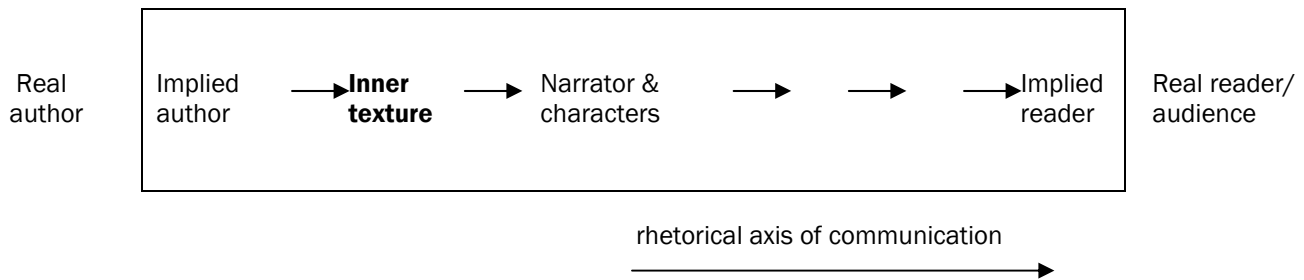
Socio-rhetorical analysis is not a static approach to textual analysis, but in constant development, exploring further integrated social, cultural, linguistic and rhetorical avenues for interpretation.

Repetitive-progressive texture in texts

Repetitive-progressive texture analysis forms part of the "*Inner texture*" analysis in Robbins' (1996a, 1999b) schema. Reading a text is a complex process (De Beaugrande and Dressler 1981) in which the text becomes "part of a communication transaction" (Vorster 1989:22). It is this "*communication transaction*" that should be of great importance for readers of ancient manuscripts. Great attention should be given to how we bridge the gap of hundreds of years when we read these texts and how much of the meanings that we find in these texts come from the original author, reflecting the original setting and how much of the meanings derived, do we bring to the text? According to Robbins (1996a:27-28) the act of reading is the beginning of the exploration of the "inner texture" of the text. In the act of reading the worlds of the author (real and implied) and reader (real and implied) combine to form this transaction of communication. Robbins's method of socio-rhetorical analysis makes use of the inner texture of the text in order to explore this above-mentioned interaction between the author, text and the reader (Robbins 1996a:30). In order to illustrate where this method of inner texture fits into the communication process, Robbins (1996a:29) modifies the diagrams of Chatman (1978:151) and

Rimmon-Kenan (1983:86) to include his method of unlocking the signs of meaning given by the author in the text (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1 - The inner texture of the text



In Robbins's modified diagram (see Figure 1) the inner texture appears amongst the axis of the implied author and the narrator and characters, who function as the vehicles of communication of the message. In the past, at this stage of interpretation, the reader would focus on formulating a profile of the real author and audience that stood outside the text. Language and text structure would not feature as the main area of focus. Socio-rhetorical analysis has as purpose to return to the text and to identify or explore the inner texture of the text and in doing so isolate the main areas of interest or intent of communication of the real/implied author and the real/implied reader or audience. Socio-rhetorical analysis takes this approach to the text even further and includes two further insights (Robbins 1996a:30):

- The results of this scholarly investigation into the identity and nature of the real/implied author and the real/implied reader or audience is brought into dialogue with other academic investigations of the text. Thus a more holistic picture is presented of the possible meanings of the text.
- The second important insight that Robbins's inner texture brings to the table of textual interpretation is the consent that the real reader or audience is an integral part in the construction of the inner text. Borrowing heavily from the insights of Anglo-American new criticism, Russian formalism and French structuralism, Robbins (1996a:30) reminds us that "...a text does not truly become a text until someone reads it." For Robbins (1996a:30) it is clear that readers are as much involved with the communication of meaning as the author. Robbins (1996a:30) states [inclusion mine]: "As soon as readers do this [reading], however, their own world of meanings and meaning effects works interactively with meanings and meaning effects from the ancient Mediterranean world to create the meaning and meaning effects of the text."

The arena of inner texture according to Robbins (1996a, 1996b) is in essence the assimilation of various interpretative techniques drawn from a wide variety of sources with the intent to present a more holistic picture of the texture of the text. It is in this assimilation that both the apparent strengths and weaknesses of this method are found. It is hoped that this approach will unlock greater meaning in the text, meaning that takes the interaction between real/implied author and the implied/real readers seriously.

Robbins (1996a, 1996b) identifies five areas of exploration in the study of the inner texture of the text:

- **Repetitive-progressive texture**
- **Opening-middle-closing texture**
- **Narrational texture**
- **Argumentative texture**
- **Sensory aesthetic texture**

Robbins (1996a:46-50) formulates his repetitive-progressive texture of the text based on the work of Tannehill (1975, 1986/9) on Luke/Acts, Trible's literary-feminist approach to Biblical narratives (1978, 1984) and Alter's treatise on the nature of Biblical narratives (1981). Armed with Tannehill and Alter's insights and heavily influenced by the work of Neiryck on duality and tripartite expressions in the Gospel of Mark (1972), Robbins

(1981, 1982, 1984, 1987) published numerous articles and a book, mostly on the Gospel of Mark that merged all of these rhetorical devices into a singular workable approach to determine the repetitive-progressive structure of the text.

More recently Robbins (1994a, 1994b, 1994c, 1994d, 1996a:48) have been influenced by the work of Scott and Dean (1993) using word-diagrams to determine a “*sound map*” of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s Gospel. Robbins (1996a:48-49) describes this next development in the quest for the repetitive-progressive structure of the text:

“At this stage, the interpreter assigns only basic lexical meanings to the words in the text. This procedure withholds fuller meanings to allow sign and sound patterns to emerge. In other words, the emphasis is on relations of the signs and sounds rather than the content and the meanings. At this stage, the interpreter is exploring primary process and form, structured movement that produces meaning process and meaning effect.”

For Robbins (1996a:49) this synthesised approach to the determination of the repetitive-progressive texture holds promise of a new window on the meaning of the text and is a determined effort to take repetition and progression seriously in the quest for the meaning of a given text. Robbins (1996a:50) proposes five possible questions in the rhetorical analysis of the repetitive-progressive texture of the text:

- What patterns emerge from the repetition of certain topics in the text?
- What topics replace other topics in the progression of the text?
- Is there continual repetition of the same word throughout the unit, or is there slight modification at almost every progressive stage?
- Does the progression bring certain kinds of words together but not others?
- Is there repetition that occurs in steps that create a context for a new word progression?

In order to illustrate the particular repetitive-progressive structure of a particular text, it is helpful to make lists of words or phrases that appear repeatedly in the unit in the same or in a modified form (Robbins 1996b:8). The next section of this paper presents several repetitive-progressive patterns in the letters to Agnes and these are used to explore the spirituality and leadership of Clare.

Servant Leadership in the letters of Clare of Assisi to Agnes of Prague

Patterson (2003:2) proposes a theoretical model of servant leadership where the concept is defined as a virtuous theory comprising of seven virtuous constructs. These virtues are (a) agapao love, (b) humility, (c) altruism, (d) vision, (e) trust, (f) empowerment and (g) service. These seven virtues are used as a matrix to explore possible repetitive-progressive patterns in Clare’s letters to Agnes. The repetitive-progressive patterns that emerge in the text are used to explore the spirituality and leadership of Clare of Assisi.

Patterson (2003:3) makes use of Winston’s (2002:5) definition of agapao love as moral love, “*doing the right thing at the right time and for the right reasons.*” Patterson (2002:3) further describes this “*love*” as characterized by having esteem for followers, honoring them and having their best interest at heart. Agnes never met Clare (Mueller 2003:8) and is astonishing that she still chose to associate herself with Clare and an order that was at its beginning stages and not as highly organized as the Benedictine order that was right next to her family’s castle. Clare’s objective in writing to Agnes can be summed up in the end of her salutations in the first letter (1LAG34): “*...that by their help we may merit the mercy of Jesus Christ, and together with you may merit to enjoy the everlasting vision.*” Clare’s love for and commitment to Agnes is not based on social relationship but on their mutual “*desire for the poor Crucified*” (1LAG13) and is communicated in her letters as she desires to teach Agnes to embrace this path of joy (Mueller 2003:9). The letters to Agnes are acts of selfless love intended to lead Agnes to true fulfillment and joy.

When Clare’s references to Agnes in her letters are analyzed, clear repetitive-progressive patterns of (a) honor, (b) esteem and (c) care emerge (see table 1). Clare addresses Agnes with terms of (a) **honor**: *Lady* (3LAG11), *Lady Agnes* (1LAG1, 2LAG1, 4LAG1), *Lady worthy of great respect* (1LAG12), *most venerable Lady* (3LAG1), *your Excellency* (1LAG31), *your holiness* (1LAG31), *daughter/blood-sister of the most excellent/illustrious King of Bohemia* (1LAG1, 3LAG1); (b) **esteem**: *esteemed/holy/poor virgin* (1LAG1, 1LAG8, 2LAG18),

spouse/mother/sister of Jesus Christ/King of Kings/most high King of the Heavens/Lamb of the eternal King/the high King (1LAg12, 1LAg24, 2LAg1, 3LAg1, 4LAg1, 4LAg4, 4LAg7, 4LAg15, 4LAg17), *handmaid of the Lord of Lords* (2LAg1), *very distinguished/noble/illustrious queen* (2LAg1, 2LAg20, 4LAg1, 4LAg15), *queen of the heavenly King* (4LAg27), *diligent imitator of the Father/poverty* (2LAg4, 2LAg7), *joy of the Angels* (3LAg11), *crown of the sisters* (3LAg11) and (c) **care**: *most beloved/dearest sister* (1LAg12, 2LAg24), *sister in Christ* (3LAg1), *dearest one* (3LAg10, 3LAg40), *most beloved in Christ* (3LAg11), *special/dearest/blessed daughter* (4LAg1, 4LAg17, 4LAg36, 4LAg39), *mother and daughter* (4LAg4). Clare's selfless attitude and esteem for her follower so evident in her letters, seem to fit both Winston's (2002:5) and Patterson's (2003:3) construct of agapao love.

Table 1 - Repetitive-progressive pattern illustrating Clare's references to Agnes

| First Letter | Second Letter | Third Letter | Fourth Letter |
|---|--|--|--|
| 1LAg1 esteemed and most holy virgin Lady Agnes daughter of the most excellent and illustrious King of Bohemia | 2LAg1 daughter of the King of kings handmaid of the Lord of lords, most worthy spouse of Jesus Christ | 3LAg1 Agnes most venerable lady sister in Christ blood-sister of the illustrious king of Bohemia | 4LAg1 illustrious queen spouse of the Lamb of the eternal King Lady Agnes special daughter |
| 1LAg8 virgin | very distinguished queen | sister and spouse of the most high King of the heavens | 4LAg3 Agnes |
| 1LAg12 most beloved sister Lady worthy of great respect spouse and the mother and the sister of my Lord Jesus Christ | Lady Agnes 2LAg4 diligent imitator of the Father 2LAg7 an imitator of the holiest poverty 2LAg18 poor virgin | 3LAg10 dearest 3LAg11 O Lady most beloved in Christ | 4LAg4 mother and daughter spouse of the King 4LAg7 spouse of Christ 4LAg15 O queen spouse of Jesus Christ |
| 1LAg24 a sister, spouse, and mother of the Son of the Father of the Most High and of the glorious Virgin | 2LAg20 most noble queen 2LAg24 dearest sister and lady | joy of the angels crown of your sisters 3LAg40 dearest one | 4LAg17 Dearest daughter spouse of the most high King 4LAg27 O queen of the heavenly King 4LAg36 blessed daughter 4LAg39 dearest daughter |
| 1LAg31 Your Excellency Your holiness | | | |

The virtuous construct of humility in servant leadership is described by Patterson (2003:3-4) as the ability to focus on others, not be arrogant and to keep one's own accomplishments in perspective. Clare makes use of very specific terms when she describes herself in the letters to Agnes in contrast to her lofty language in referring to her follower (see table 2). She provides **no aristocratic title** for herself (even though like Agnes she came from an aristocratic family), she simply calls herself **Clare** (1LAg2, 2LAg1, 3LAg2, 4LAg2). She presents herself as the **servant of Agnes** (1LAg2, 1LAg33, 3LAg2, 4LAg2), **a subject** (1LAg2), **handmaid** (1LAg2, 2LAg1, 2LAg2, 3LAg2, 4LAg2), **unworthy/useless** (1LAg2, 1LAg33, 2LAg2, 3LAg2, 4LAg2) and **most humble** (3LAg2). If Clare must take position of leadership in regards to Agnes, she makes use of the descriptors of **mother and poor little mother** (4LAg1, 4LAg33). Clare's use of humble references to herself in the letters to Agnes serves to keep the focus on Agnes, her follower. It is all about the follower in her letters. All of this seems to suggest that humility is one of the cardinal leadership values for Clare.

Table 2 - Repetitive-progressive pattern illustrating Clare’s self-reference

| First Letter | Second Letter | Third Letter | Fourth Letter |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|
| 1LAg2 Clare | 2LAg1 Clare | 3LAg2 Clare | 4LAg1 mother |
| an unworthy servant | handmaid | most humble | 4LAg2 Clare |
| useless handmaid | 2LAg2 useless and unworthy handmaid | unworthy handmaid | unworthy servant |
| her subject | | servant | useless handmaid |
| servant in all things | | | handmaids |
| | | | 4LAg33 poor little mother |
| 1LAg33 Your servant, though unworthy | | | |

Patterson (2003:4) describes altruism as serving others for the sake of serving, as radical equality and seeking the fulfillment of others. Clare’s repetitive references to herself (see table 2) as **unworthy/useless servant/handmaid** (1LAg2, 1LAg33, 2LAg2, 3LAg2, 4LAg2) further serve to communicate a radical, if not extreme equality between leader and follower. The nature of this equality is expressed in the leader being a **subject** (1LAg2) and **servant in all things** (1LAg2) to the follower. Clare seeks the fulfillment and joy of Agnes. She wants Agnes to embrace poverty (see table 3) because it is a **“laudable exchange”** (1LAg30). This will lead to Agnes receiving and possessing the **“blessed and eternal life”** (1LAg30). The humble attitude of Clare, relationship of equality and desire to see Agnes blessed and fulfilled is reminiscent of the virtuous construct of altruism as described by Patterson (2003:4).

Table 3 - Progressive pattern illustrating Clare’s reference to the “laudable exchange” of poverty in the first letter to Agnes

| First Letter |
|--|
| 1LAg30 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. |

The construct of vision in servant leadership is described by Patterson (2003:4-5) as a determined focus on the follower whilst providing the follower with a vision that will provide the follower with *“purpose, direction and dignity.”* Clare’s vision can be described in one word: poverty (see table 4). The mystery of poverty for Clare is essentially part of the mystery of salvation and the Gospel (Ledoux 1997:55). Christ emptied Himself (Philippians 2:5-11) and became poor *“...so that people who were in utter poverty and want and in absolute need of heavenly nourishment might become rich in Him by possessing the kingdom of heaven”* (1LAg20). Ledoux (1997:54) links Clare’s understanding of the poverty of Christ to her proclamation of the lordship of Christ:

“The lordship of Jesus emerges from His poverty. Our salvation, which is linked to this lordship, comes from Christ’s abasement: Christ the Lord comes from the poor Christ.”

Clare describes Gospel poverty as (a) **holy** (1LAg6, 1LAg13, 1LAg16, 2LAg7), (b) **blessed** (1LAg15, 4LAg22), (c) **utter/utmost** (1LAg20, 2LAg2), (d) **astonishing** (4LAg20), and (e) **God-centered** (1LAg17). Agnes is encouraged by Clare to embrace Jesus whose is described as (a) **the poor Crucified** (1LAg13), (b) **the poor Christ** (1LAg18), and **poor and humble** (3LAg4). As Agnes embraces poverty she will be a **poor virgin** (2LAg18), one of the **poor ladies** (2LAg2, 3LAg2) and so follow the example of her leader, who is a **poor little mother** (4LAg33). Clare communicates a vision/charism of voluntary poverty that will enable Agnes to imitate

the poor Christ and doing so attain to Christian perfection: “**chaste**” and “**pure**” (1LAg8). These theological elements in Clare’s letters become the vocational vision for Agnes. There is value congruence between Patterson’s (2003:4-5) construct of vision and Clare’s focus on Gospel poverty.

Table 4 - Repetitive-progressive pattern illustrating Clare’s references to poverty

| First Letter | Second Letter | Third Letter | Fourth Letter |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|--|-------------------------------|
| 1LAg6 holy poverty | 2LAg2 the Poor Ladies | 3LAg2 the Poor Ladies | 4LAg18 blessed poverty |
| 1LAg13 most holy poverty | utmost poverty | 3LAg4 the poor and humble Jesus Christ | 4LAg19 the poverty of Him |
| the Poor Crucified | 2LAg7 holiest poverty | | 4LAg20 O astonishing poverty! |
| 1LAg15 blessed poverty | 2LAg18 poor virgin | 3LAg7 the arms of poverty | 4LAg22 His blessed poverty |
| 1LAg16 holy poverty | the Poor Christ | 3LAg25 poverty in your chaste and virginal body, | 4LAg33 poor little mother |
| 1LAg17 God-centered poverty | | | |
| 1LAg19 the poor in this world | | | |
| 1LAg20 utter poverty | | | |
| 1LAg22 poverty | | | |
| 1LAg25 the poor | | | |

Patterson (2003:5) describes the value of trust in servant leadership as closely aligned to the values of integrity and honesty that leads to credibility. The relationship between Clare and Agnes is one of radical equality. Clare does not only play the role of leader but also entrusts her vision and mission to Agnes, whom she describes as “*the other half of her soul*” (4LAg1). A repetitive-progressive pattern emerges when Clare’s petitions for prayer from Agnes are examined in her letters (see table 5). Clare petitions Agnes six times for prayers (1LAg33, 1LAg35, 2LAg26, 3LAg42, 4LAg37, 4LAg39). These petitions serve, amongst other things, to engender trust in Agnes. A reciprocal relationship of trust and equality is communicated through the use of this rhetorical device. A cursory reading of Clare’s letters to Agnes shows that the relationship between her and her follower is not one of dominance but rather one of trust and integrity.

Table 5 - Repetitive-progressive pattern illustrating Clare’s petition for prayer

| First Letter | Second Letter | Third Letter | Fourth Letter |
|---|--|--|--|
| 1LAg33 I also beg You in the Lord, as much as I can, to include in Your holy prayers me | 2LAg26 as often as possible, please remind your sisters to pray for us | 3LAg42 and be sure to remember both me and my sisters in your holy prayers | 4LAg37 please ask them to pray for me and my daughters in Christ |
| 1LAg35 pray for me | | | 4LAg39 pray for us |

The construct of empowerment in servant leadership is described by Patterson (2003:6) as the willingness to entrust followers with power, leading them to personal transformation as they act on their values. Agnes started her religious vocation with the option of virginity when she rejected the political, marital alliances made for her by her father and communicated her desire for a celibate, consecrated life (Armstrong and Brady 1982:189). Mueller (2003:12-15) points towards the obvious connections between the life of Agnes and the legend of St. Agnes of Rome who was martyred for her virginity in the early years of the Church. Clare strengthens Agnes’ resolve and option of celibacy by providing her with a theological foundation for her choice

(see table 6). Clare describes Agnes’ virginity as (a) **holy** (1LAg1, 4LAg8), (b) **prudent** (4LAg38), (c) **to be esteemed** (1LAg1) and (d) **inviolable** (1LAg13). Agnes is encouraged to imitate the virginity of Mary, who is described as (a) **the Virgin** (3LAg17) (b) **the glorious Virgin** (1LAg24), and (c) **the glorious Virgin of virgins** (2LAg24). Clare empowers Agnes to act on her inherent belief that obedience to God meant a celibate vocation for her.

Table 6 - Repetitive-progressive pattern illustrating Clare’s references to virginity

| First Letter | Second Letter | Third Letter | Fourth Letter |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1LAg1 esteemed and most holy virgin | 2LAg18 poor virgin | 3LAg17 the Virgin a virgin | 4LAg3 most holy virgins |
| 1LAg7 your virginity | 2LAg24 glorious Virgin of virgins | 3LAg25 your chaste and virginal body | 4LAg8 most holy virgin |
| 1LAg8 virgin | | | 4LAg38 the most prudent virgin |
| 1LAg13 inviolable virginity | | | |
| 1LAg19 the Virgin | | | |
| 1LAg24 the glorious Virgin | | | |

Patterson (2003:6) describes the “core” construct of service in servant leadership as the voluntary choice of the interests of others over self-interest. Clare refers to herself consistently as a **servant/handmaid/subject** (1LAg2, 1LAg 33, 2LAg1, 2LAg2, 3LAg 2, 4LAg2) that is **unworthy/useless** (1LAg2, 1LAg33, 2LAg2, 3LAg2, 4LAg2). Agnes is encouraged by Clare o accept this vocation of service that she describes as **holy** (1LAg13, 1LAg31). The repetitive-progressive pattern (see table 7) illustrating Clare’s references to service in the letters to Agnes serve to identify service as primary to Clare’s understanding of leadership.

Table 7- Repetitive-progressive pattern illustrating Clare’s references to service

| First Letter | Second Letter | Third Letter | Fourth Letter |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| 1LAg2 an unworthy servant | 2LAg1 handmaid | 3LAg2 unworthy handmaid | 4LAg2 unworthy servant |
| useless handmaid | 2LAg2 useless and unworthy handmaid | servant | useless handmaid |
| her subject | | | handmaids |
| servant in all things | | | |
| 1LAg4 all who serve | | | |
| seek to serve | | | |
| 1LAg13 holy service | | | |
| 1LAg26 serve | | | |
| served | | | |
| 1LAg31 holy service | | | |
| 1LAg32 serve | | | |
| 1LAg33 Your servant, though unworthy | | | |

Kenotic mysticism and servant leadership in the letters of Clare of Assisi to Agnes of Prague

Clare links her vocation to service with a mystical attraction to Christ who emptied Himself for others (see table 8). Clare's desire to serve and hope to facilitate a similar spiritual formation in Agnes, is fueled by "an ardent desire for the Poor Crucified" (1LAg13)

Table 8 - Repetitive-progressive pattern illustrating Clare's reference to service through kenotic mysticism in the first letter to Agnes

| First Letter | |
|--------------|--|
| 1LAg13 | Be strengthened in the holy service which You have undertaken out of an ardent desire for the Poor Crucified |
| 1LAg31 | be strengthened in His holy service |

Both Francis and Clare were taken by the kenosis of Christ. Not only were they enthralled by this vision of the "poor Christ" (2LAg18), they sought to imitate Him. Karecki and Wroblewski (2000A:12-13) write of Francis of Assisi:

"...In the kenosis of Christ, Francis saw God's infinite love for men and women in the condescension of the Word in becoming human and laying down of His life in Calvary. This coming down, this humbling, this stooping to become small, this humility and poverty, this minority was appropriated by Francis when he gradually stripped himself of all signs of power and status in order to identify with the poorest, the lepers."

Clare had the same vision. For Clare this "following in His footsteps" (2LAg7) were steps of love. Karecki (2000A:2) comments:

"...The Christ who captivated Clare's heart was the poor, suffering Christ and response she consented to become His spouse. This is not an abstract image or concept, but a person, the person of Christ. Clare's poetic words to Agnes reveal a spousal intimacy that filled her with love."

This active contemplation of Jesus Christ is the way for transformation for Clare. Note the three-fold progression of terms (**loved, touched, accepted**) that are used in her first letter to Agnes (1LAg8) to describe the nature of the transformation: chaste, pure, virgin (table 9). Another three-fold progression (**place your mind, place your soul, place your heart**) is evident in Clare's third letter to Agnes as she described the transformative nature of Christo-centric contemplation (see table 10).

Figure 9 - Progressive pattern illustrating Clare's reference to active contemplation in the first letter to Agnes

| First Letter | |
|--------------|---|
| 1Lag8 | When You have <i>loved</i> [Him], You shall be <u>chaste</u> ; when You have <i>touched</i> [Him], You shall become <u>pure</u> ; when You have <i>accepted</i> [Him], You shall be a <u>virgin</u> . |

Figure 10 - Progressive pattern illustrating Clare's reference to active contemplation in the third letter to Agnes

| Third Letter | |
|--------------|---|
| 3LAg12 | Place your mind in the mirror of eternity; Place your soul in the splendor of glory; |
| 3LAg13 | Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance; And, through contemplation, <u>transform your entire being</u> <u>Into the image of the Divine One himself.</u> |
| 3LAg14 | So that you, yourself, may also experience what his friends experience When they taste the hidden sweetness That God alone has kept from the beginning For those who love him. |

This kenotic mysticism of Clare is rooted in a mimetic re-enactment of the self-emptying (kenosis) Christ as seen in the Christological hymn of Philippians 2:5-11 (Kourie 1993:127). This becomes the hermeneutical key for Clare in which she interprets the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and applies its meaning for her community and her time (Kourie 1993:127). Christ is a mirror for Clare (the *speculum perfectionis*) and she encourages Agnes to gaze into this mirror daily (4LAg 14-27 - see table 11). Note again the three-fold progression in Clare's instruction of active contemplation in the fourth letter to Agnes: **look closely, consider, ponder**. As Agnes considers the voluntary poverty evident in the birth, life and death of Christ, she in turn is encouraged to burn strongly with the "fire of charity" (4LAg 27). It is important to note the choice of the metaphor of the mirror and the transformative dynamics that it communicates. This is highly reminiscent of similar imagery in Paul second letter to the Corinthians (3:18). For Clare contemplation brings transformation that enables leaders imitate and reflect the virtues of God. Purfield (1989) comments:

"Clare reminds us that contemplation is not a mere reflection but, rather, it is a participation and a transformation of the beholder. She emphasizes that as they are being transformed, Christians, in turn, have to become mirrors and to reflect God."

Table 11 - Progressive pattern illustrating Clare's reference to active contemplation in the fourth letter to Agnes

| Fourth Letter | |
|---------------|--|
| 4LAg14 | Because the vision of him is the splendor of everlasting glory, The radiance of everlasting light, and a <u>mirror</u> without tarnish. |
| 4LAg15 | Look into <u>this mirror</u> every day, O queen, spouse of Jesus Christ, And continually examine your face in it, |
| 4LAg18 | Moreover, in <u>this mirror</u> shine blessed poverty, holy humility, and charity beyond words, as you will be able, with God's grace, to contemplate throughout the entire mirror. |
| 4LAg19 | Look closely , I say, to the <i>beginning of the life of this admired one</i> , indeed at the poverty of him who was wrapped in swaddling clothes and placed in a manger. |
| 4LAg22 | Consider also the <i>midst of his life</i> , his humility, or at least his blessed poverty, the countless hardships, and the punishments that he endured for the redemption of the human race. |
| 4LAg23 | Indeed, ponder the <i>final days</i> of <u>this mirrored one</u> , contemplate the ineffable love with which he was willing to suffer on the tree of the cross and to die there a kind of death that is more shameful than any other. |
| 4LAg27 | Therefore, seeing this, O queen of the heavenly King, you must burn ever more strongly with the fervor of charity! |

Jesus is the paradigm and exemplar for Clare (Karecki and Wroblewski 2000B:12). The kenosis of Christ is the primary act of God's love for the world. Agnes is encouraged to make the kenosis of Christ her focus as she desires to serve (see table 12). Note again Clare's three-fold progression of active contemplation in the

second letter to Agnes: **gaze, examine and contemplate**. This understanding of Divine love leads to self-sacrificial service. Karecki and Wroblewski (2000A:12-13) comment:

“Rarely is it pointed out that the genius of Francis and Clare’s charism is that they made kenosis the special hallmark of Divine Love...What kenosis shows and clearly demonstrates is that Divine Love is non-possessive, disinterested, self-giving.”

Figure 12 - Progressive pattern illustrating Clare’s reference to active contemplation in the second letter to Agnes

| Second Letter | |
|---------------|--|
| 2Lag20 | <p>Gaze upon, examine, contemplate, most noble queen, <i>desiring to follow</i> your spouse, who is more beautiful than the sons of humankind, and who for your salvation became the vilest of men, despised, struck, and flogged repeatedly over his entire body, dying while suffering the excruciating torments of the cross.</p> |
| 2Lag 21 | <p>If you <i>suffer with Him</i>, with Him you will <u>reign</u>, <i>grieving with Him</i>, with Him you will <u>rejoice</u>. <i>dying with Him</i> on the cross of tribulation, with him you will <u>possess</u> mansions in heaven among the splendors of the saints,</p> |

Kenotic mysticism allows the leader to transcend narrow selfhood (Kourie 1993:124) and truly enter into the world of the follower. Raguin (1973:111) describes this state as receptive. Raguin (1973:111) notes:

“...kenosis, then, places us in a state of receptivity. We develop an instinctive attitude of listening, trying to understand, letting ourselves be permeated with the atmosphere of our surroundings, passing beyond what is merely heard and seen to reach the personality of the people with whom we love, or those we may meet.”

Kenotic mysticism in Clare’s letters to Agnes is a direct communion with the kenotic Christ. Ledoux (1997:40) notes:

“...in Clare’s view, Christian mystical experience achieves an encounter, a knowledge of and an existential communion with Christ.”

This communion with Christ leads to personal transformation of both the leader and follower and enables them to practice kenosis (self-emptying) as Christ did. This “*resolute divesting*” of possessions and power (Cronin 1992:1) enables the leader and follower enter into a new union that is marked by equality and service. Raguin (1973:112) writes:

“...kenosis, then, is the gateway to mutual understanding, and beyond this, to an intimate sharing that is the consummation of a relationship in union...By dispossession of self we are able to absorb the amazing riches of others...”

Kenotic mysticism and servant leadership are closely linked in Clare’s writings in an inter-dependant dynamic system of personal and communal transformation through radical self-emptying fuelled by a commitment to Jesus Christ.

Summative Comments

In summary, successive repetitive-progressive pattern analyses of the letters of Clare of Assisi to Agnes of Prague suggest the following. Firstly, Greenleaf’s (1998) description and Patterson’s (2003) theoretical model of servant leadership fit the leadership approach and values of Clare of Assisi. Secondly, Clare links her kenotic mysticism with her practice of servant leadership. It is her “*ardent desire*” for the “*poor Crucified*” that brings her to service. Finally, contemplation and appropriation of the kenosis of Christ enables the leader and follower to transcend a narrow vision of self and facilitates a radical commitment to others in service.

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Addendum

The first letter to Agnes of Prague¹ (1Lag - before June 11, 1234)

¹To the esteemed and most holy virgin, the Lady Agnes, daughter of the most excellent and illustrious King of Bohemia:

²Clare, an unworthy servant of Jesus Christ and useless handmaid 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.

³As 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.

⁴I am not alone in rejoicing at such great news, but [I am joined by] all who serve and seek to serve Jesus Christ.

⁵For, 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,

⁶You have rejected all these things and have chosen with Your whole heart and soul a life of holy poverty and destitution.

⁷Thus You took a spouse of a more noble lineage, Who will keep Your virginity ever unspotted and unsullied, the Lord Jesus Christ:

⁸When 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.

⁹Whose power is stronger,
Whose generosity is more abundant,
Whose appearance more beautiful,
Whose love more tender,
Whose courtesy more gracious.

¹⁰In Whose embrace You are already caught up;
Who has adorned Your breast with precious stones
And has placed priceless pearls in Your ears

¹¹and 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.

¹²Therefore, 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,

¹³and 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,

¹ This is the translation of Regis J. Armstrong in Armstrong, R J and Brady, I C 1982. Francis and Clare - The Complete Works. New York: Paulist Press.

¹⁴Who for the sake of all of us took upon Himself the Passion of the Cross and delivered us from the power of the Prince of Darkness to whom we were enslaved because of the disobedience of our first parents, and so reconciled us to God the Father.

¹⁵O blessed poverty,
who bestows eternal riches on those who love and embrace her!

¹⁶O holy poverty,
to those who possess and desire you
God promises the kingdom of heaven
and offers, indeed, eternal glory and blessed life!

¹⁷O 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!

¹⁸The 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, but bowing His head gave up His spirit.

¹⁹If so great and good a Lord, then, on coming into the Virgin's womb, chose to appear despised, needy, and poor in this world,

²⁰so that people who were in utter poverty and want and in absolute need of heavenly nourishment might become rich in Him by possessing the kingdom of heaven,

²¹then rejoice and be glad! Be filled with a remarkable happiness and a spiritual joy!

²²Contempt 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,

²³where rust does not consume nor moth destroy nor thieves break in and steal. Your reward, then, is very great in heaven!

²⁴And You have truly merited to be called a sister, spouse, and mother of the Son of the Father of the Most High and of the glorious Virgin.

²⁵You know, I am sure, that the kingdom of heaven is promised and given by the Lord only to the poor: for he who loves temporal things loses the fruit of love.

²⁶Such a person cannot serve God and Mammon, for either the one is loved and the other is hated, or the one is served and the other despised.

²⁷You 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;

²⁸and 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.

²⁹Therefore, 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 narrow gate.

³⁰What 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.

³¹Because 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,

³²and to progress from good to better, from virtue to virtue, so that He Whom You serve with the total desire of Your soul may bestow on You the reward for which You long.

³³I 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

³⁴that by their help we may merit the mercy of Jesus Christ, and together with You may merit to enjoy the everlasting vision.

³⁵Farewell in the Lord. And pray for me.

The second letter to the Agnes of Prague (2Lag - between 1234-1238)

¹To the daughter of the King of kings, handmaid of the Lord of lords, most worthy spouse of Jesus Christ and therefore, very distinguished queen, the Lady Agnes,

²Clare, useless and unworthy handmaid of the Poor Ladies, sends her greetings and the prayer that Agnes may always live in the utmost poverty.

³I thank the one who liberally bestows grace, from whom every best and perfect gift is believed to come, because he has adorned you with such a good reputation founded upon your virtues and has made you shine with the honors of so much perfection.

⁴He did this so that once you have been made a diligent imitator of the Father who is perfect, you may deserve to be made perfect, so that his eyes may not see anything imperfect in you.

⁵This is that perfection with which the King will unite you to himself in marriage in heaven's bridal chamber where he sits in glory upon his starry throne,

⁶because despising the heights of an earthly kingdom and the less than worthy offers of an imperial marriage,

⁷you have been made an imitator of the holiest poverty, and in a spirit of great humility and the most ardent charity, you have clung to the footsteps of him with whom you have been worthy to be united in marriage.

⁸Moreover, since I know that you are laden with virtues, I shall refrain from saying too much as I do not wish to laden you with superfluous words,

⁹even though to you no word seems superfluous of those that could be the source of some consolation for you.

¹⁰But because one thing is necessary, I invoke this one thing and advise you, by the love of him to whom you have offered yourself as a holy and pleasing sacrifice,

¹¹to be mindful, like a second Rachel, of your founding purpose always seeing your beginning. What you hold, may you continue to hold, what you do, may you keep doing and not stop,

¹²but with swift pace, nimble step, and feet that do not stumble so that even your walking does not raise any dust,

¹³may you go forward tranquilly, joyfully, briskly, and cautiously along the path of happiness,

¹⁴trusting in no one and agreeing with no one insofar as he might want to dissuade you from pursuing your founding purpose or might place a stumbling block in your way, preventing you, in that perfection with which the Spirit of the Lord has called you, from fulfilling your vows to the Most High.

¹⁵No concerning this, so that you may walk more tranquilly along the way of the Lord's commands, follow the advice of our venerable father, our Brother Elias, minister general.

¹⁶Prefer his advice to the advice of others and consider it more precious to you than any gift.

¹⁷Indeed, if someone tells you something else or suggests anything to you that may hinder your perfection and that seems contrary to your divine vocation, even though you must respect him, still, do not follow his advice;

¹⁸instead, poor virgin, embrace the Poor Christ.

¹⁹Now that you have made yourself contemptible in this world for his sake, look upon and follow the one who made himself contemptible for your sake.

²⁰Gaze upon, examine, contemplate, most noble queen, desiring to follow your spouse, who is more beautiful than the sons of humankind, and who for your salvation became the vilest of men, despised, struck, and flogged repeatedly over his entire body, dying while suffering the excruciating torments of the cross.

²¹If you suffer with him, with him you will reign, grieving with him, with him you will rejoice, dying with him on the cross of tribulation, with him you will possess mansions in heaven among the splendors of the saints,

²²and your name will be recorded in the Book of Life and will bring you glory among men and women.

²³This is why you may forever in eternity share the glory of the heavenly kingdom rather than what is earthly and transitory, eternal goods instead of those that perish, and why you will live forever and ever.

²⁴Farewell, dearest sister and lady, for the sake of the Lord, your spouse;

²⁵and constantly remember me, as well as my sisters-for we rejoice in the good things of the Lord that he is accomplishing in you through his grace-in your devout prayers to the Lord.

²⁶Also, as often as possible, please remind your sisters to pray for us.

The third letter to Agnes of Prague (3Lag - early 1238)

¹To Agnes, most venerable lady and sister in Christ, deserving of love before all other mortals, blood-sister of the illustrious king of Bohemia, but now sister and spouse of the most high King of the heavens,

²Clare, most humble and unworthy handmaid of Christ and servant of the Poor Ladies, sends her prayer for the joys of salvation in him who is the Author of Salvation and for everything better that can be desired.

³I am filled with such great joy about your well-being, your happiness, and your favorable successes through which, I understand, you are thriving on the journey you have begun to obtain the reward of heaven;

⁴and I breathe again in the Lord with elation equal to my knowledge and belief that you are supplying in wonderful ways what is lacking both in me and in the other sisters who are following in the footsteps of the poor and humble Jesus Christ.

⁵I am indeed able to rejoice, and there is no one who could separate me from such great joy,

⁶since I already possess what under heaven I have yearned for, and I see that you, supported by some kind of wonderful claim on the wisdom that comes from God's own mouth, are formidably and extraordinarily

undermining the stratagems of the cunning enemy, the pride that destroys human nature, and the vanity that beguiles human hearts.

⁷I see, too, that you are embracing with humility, the virtue of faith, and the arms of poverty the incomparable treasure that lies hidden in the field of the world and the hearts of human beings, where it is purchased by the One by whom all things were made from nothing.

⁸And, to use as my own the words of the apostle himself, I consider you someone who is God's own helper and who supports the drooping limbs of his ineffable body.

⁹Who, then, would tell me not to rejoice about such great and marvelous joys?

¹⁰That is why you, too, dearest, must always rejoice in the Lord,

¹¹and not let bitterness and confusion envelop you, O Lady most beloved in Christ, joy of the angels, and crown of your sisters.

¹²Place your mind in the mirror of eternity;
Place your soul in the splendor of glory;

¹³Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance;
And, through contemplation, transform your entire being
Into the image of the Divine One himself,

¹⁴So that you, yourself, may also experience what his friends experience
When they taste the hidden sweetness
That God alone has kept from the beginning
For those who love him.

¹⁵And completely ignoring all those who in this deceitful and turbulent world ensnare their blind lovers, you might totally love him who gave himself totally out of love for you,

¹⁶whose beauty the sun and moon admire, and whose rewards, in both their preciousness and magnitude, are without end.

¹⁷I am speaking about the Son of the Most High, to whom the Virgin gave birth and, after whose birth, she remained a virgin.

¹⁸May you cling to his most sweet Mother, who gave birth to the kind of Son whom the heavens could not contain,

¹⁹and yet, she carried him in the tiny enclosure of her sacred womb, and held him on her young girl's lap.

²⁰Who would not abhor the treachery of the enemy of humanity who, by means of the pride that results from fleeting and false glories, compels that which is greater than heaven to return to nothingness?

²¹See, it is already clear that the soul of a faithful person, the most worthy of God's creations through the grace of God, is greater than heaven,

²²since the heavens and the rest of creation together cannot contain their Creator and only the soul of a faithful person is his dwelling place and throne and this is possible only through the charity that the wicked lack.

²³For the Truth says: The one who loves me, will be loved by my Father, and I shall love him and we shall come to him and make our dwelling place with him.

²⁴So, just as the glorious Virgin of virgins carried him physically,

²⁵so, you too, following in her footsteps especially those of humility and poverty, can without any doubt, always carry him spiritually in your chaste and virginal body,

²⁶containing him by whom both you and all things are contained, and possessing that which, even when compared with the other transitory possessions of this world, you will possess more securely.

²⁷Regarding this, some kings and queens of this world are deceived;

²⁸even though in their pride they have climbed all the way up to the sky, and their heads have touched the clouds, in the end they are destroyed like a pile of dung.

²⁹Now, I thought that I should respond to your charity about the things that you have asked me to clarify for you;

³⁰namely, what were the feasts-and I imagine, that you have perhaps figured this out to some extent-that our most glorious father, Saint Francis, urged us to celebrate in a special way with different kinds of foods.

³¹Indeed, your prudence knows that, with the exception of the weak and the sick, for whom he advised and authorized to use every possible discretion with respect to any foods whatsoever,

³²none of us who are healthy and strong ought to eat anything other than Lenten fare, on both ordinary days and feast days,

³³fasting every day except on Sundays and on the Lord's Nativity, when we ought to eat twice a day.

³⁴And, on Thursdays in Ordinary Time, fasting should reflect the personal decision of each sister, so that whoever might not wish to fast would not be obligated to do so.

³⁵All the same, those of us who are healthy fast every day except Sundays and Christmas.

³⁶Certainly, during the entire Easter week, as Blessed Francis states in what he has written, and on the feasts of holy Mary and the holy apostles, we are also not obliged to fast, unless these feasts should fall on a Friday;

³⁷and, as has already been said, we who are healthy and strong always eat Lenten fare.

³⁸But because neither is our flesh the flesh of bronze, nor our strength the strength of stone,

³⁹but instead, we are frail and prone to every bodily weakness,

⁴⁰I am asking and begging in the Lord that you be restrained wisely, dearest one, and discreetly from the indiscreet and impossibly severe fasting that I know you have imposed upon yourself,

⁴¹so that living, you might profess the Lord, and might return to the Lord your reasonable worship and your sacrifice always seasoned with salt.

⁴²Stay well, always in the Lord, just as I very much desire to stay well, and be sure to remember both me and my sisters in your holy prayers.

The fourth letter to Agnes of Prague (4Lag - between February and early August 1253)

¹To the other half of her soul and repository of the special love of her deepest heart, illustrious queen, spouse of the Lamb of the eternal King, the Lady Agnes, her own dearest mother and, among all the others, her special daughter,

²Clare, unworthy servant of Christ and useless handmaid of his handmaids who live in the Monastery of San Damiano in Assisi,

³sends greetings and her prayer that Agnes, together with the other most holy virgins, will sing a new song before the throne of God and of the Lamb, and will follow the Lamb wherever he goes.

⁴O mother and daughter, spouse of the King and all ages, even if I have not written to you as frequently as both your soul and mine would have desired and longed for,

⁵do not for a moment wonder or believe in any way that the fire of my love for you burns any less sweetly in the deepest heart of your mother.

⁶The truth is that a shortage of messengers and the obvious perils of travel have hindered me.

⁷But now, as I write to your love, I rejoice and exult for you in the joy of the Spirit, spouse of Christ,

⁸because like that other most holy virgin, Saint Agnes, you have been in an astonishing way espoused to the immaculate Lamb, who, having assumed responsibility for all the vanities of this world, takes away the sins of the world.

⁹Happy, indeed, is the one permitted to share in this sacred banquet so as to be joined with all the feelings of her heart to him

¹⁰Whose beauty all the blessed hosts of the heavens unceasingly admire,

¹¹Whose affection moves, whose contemplation invigorates,
Whose generosity fills,

¹²Whose sweetness replenishes,
Whose remembrance pleasantly brings light,

¹³Whose fragrance will revive the dead,
And whose glorious vision will bless
All the citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem,

¹⁴Because the vision of him is the splendor of everlasting glory,
The radiance of everlasting light, and a mirror without tarnish.

¹⁵Look into this mirror every day,
O queen, spouse of Jesus Christ,
And continually examine your face in it,

¹⁶So that in this way you may adorn yourself completely,
Inwardly and outwardly, clothed and covered in multicolored apparel,

¹⁷Adorned in the same manner with flowers and garments
Made of all the virtues as is proper,
Dearest daughter and spouse of the most high King.

¹⁸Moreover, in this mirror shine blessed poverty, holy humility, and charity beyond words, as you will be able, with God's grace, to contemplate throughout the entire mirror.

¹⁹Look closely, I say, to the beginning of the life of this admired one, indeed at the poverty of him who was wrapped in swaddling clothes and placed in a manger.

²⁰O marvelous humility!
O astonishing poverty!

²¹The King of the angels,
The Lord of heaven and earth is
Laid to rest in a manger!

²²Consider also the midst of his life, his humility, or at least his blessed poverty, the countless hardships, and the punishments that he endured for the redemption of the human race.

²³Indeed, ponder the final days of this mirrored one, contemplate the ineffable love with which he was willing to suffer on the tree of the cross and to die there a kind of death that is more shameful than any other.

²⁴That mirror suspended upon the wood of the cross from there kept urging those passing by of what must be considered, saying:

²⁵O all you who pass by this way, look and see if there is any suffering like my suffering.

²⁶In response let us with one voice and in one spirit answer him who is crying out and lamenting: I will remember this over and over and my soul will sink within me.

²⁷Therefore, seeing this, O queen of the heavenly King, you must burn ever more strongly with the fervor of charity!

²⁸Furthermore, as you contemplate his indescribable delights, riches, and everlasting honors,

²⁹and heaving a sigh because of your heart's immeasurable desire and love may you exclaim:

³⁰Draw me after you, Heavenly Spouse, we shall run in the fragrance of your perfumes!

³¹I shall run and not grow weary until you bring me into the wine cellar,

³²until your left hand is under my head and your right arm blissfully embraces me; and you kiss me with the most blissful kiss of your mouth.

³³As you are placed in this contemplation, may you remember your poor little mother,

³⁴(knowing that I have inseparably inscribed the happy memory of you on the tablets of my heart, for I regard you as dearer than all others.

³⁵Why say more? Let my physical tongue be silent, as it is said, and let the tongue of the Spirit speak.

³⁶O blessed daughter, since in no way at all could my bodily tongue express more fully the love that I have for you, that which I have written is certainly inadequate.

³⁷I beg you to receive these words with kindness and devotion, seeing in them at least the motherly affection, by which every day I am stirred by the fire of love for you and your daughters; please ask them to pray for me and my daughters in Christ.

³⁸Indeed, inasmuch as they are able, my own daughters, and especially the most prudent virgin, Agnes, our sister, beg you and your daughters to pray for them in the Lord.

³⁹Farewell, dearest daughter, together with your own daughters, until we meet at the throne of glory of the great God, and pray for us.

⁴⁰I must now commend to your charity, as fully as possible, our dearest bearers of this letter, Brother Amato, beloved by God and human beings, and Brother Bonaugura.

Amen.