***Notes for Reflection 2***

**CONSIDER - *The Virtues of Clare’s Heart: Trust, Transparency and Tenderness***

This reflection focuses on our desire/need to seek out Clare as model for “being sister” as we endeavor to rediscover for ourselves what it means to be sister, especially in these uncharted third and fourth chapters of our lives, as increasing numbers of sisters are spending more time living together in community and in each other's company.  As we experience the return to larger communities, we must be attentive to the fact that contemporary communal living cannot be a simple reinvention of convent life circa 1960.

In the third and fourth chapters of life, sisters are simultaneously *bringing with them* and *letting go of* the joys and sorrows of a life time of experiences, relationships, commitments. Making the move from “*independent* inter-dependency” to “*dependent* inter-dependency” makes many demands on the human heart, demands with which Clare was all too familiar, given the illnesses and physical limitations that influenced her way of responding to God’s grace, love and mercy.

One thing is for certain, *poverty that is chosen* is decidedly different from the *impoverishment of deprivation and loss*. Yet, they are not unrelated. What life lessons can we learn by reflecting upon the *sororal* virtues that Clare cultivated in her heart? Among her many virtues, I would like to focus on three: Trust/*Confiança*, Transparency, and Tenderness.

**Trust/*Confiança/Confianza***

One of the amazing things about words and languages is that sometimes we really need more than a single word or the rendering of that word in a single language in order to capture the depth and breadth of meaning of the experience we are trying to communicate. So it is with the word “trust.” Our efforts to convey the deep meaning of “trust in God or confidence in the providence of God,” “trust or confidence in others,” and “trust or confidence in self,” are always limited and constrained to some degree. What we cannot always fully express in words – in English, Portuguese, Spanish or Jamaican Patois, we can know deeply from experience – both the presence of trust and its absence.

As we consider the life of Clare through the testimonies of the witnesses involved in the *Process of Canonization*, we get a glimpse into her capacity for trust at all three levels – as seen through the eyes of others. In her dealings with her sisters and those who came to her seeking various sorts of healing, we see how she was able to inspire others to take a chance on trusting God, trusting others and trusting themselves.

In Clare’s letters, we see this dynamic playing out in her own voice - as she reveals to Agnes the depth of her own confidence in God’s holy manner of working in her life and as she encourages Agnes to do the same. No stranger to vulnerability, Clare had insight into the forces that give rise to trials and temptations – spiritual, physical and emotional [III Ag 38-41]. Always attentive to the power of God’s grace in her life, she took nothing for granted as she sought to follow in the foot prints of the humble and poor Christ.

Similarly, in the early legends, we also are given access to descriptions of Clare’s acts of discernment and determination, actions that were rooted in experiences of trust that would not be undermined or diminished. While entrusting herself and all those whom she loved to the Most High, she also recognized the need to take charge of reality in the measure that she was called to do so according to God’s own will and purpose.

Mindful of Clare’s experiences and example, I now invite you to enter into a few moments of initial recollection and reflection. **[See Handout 2.1 – Exercise Recollection on Trust].** I will not be asking you to share any content with others as part of the exercise (though you may choose to do so with others at another moment). However, I will ask you to identify and discuss how such recollection stirs your heart and mind with regard to the place of trust in our lives – individually and collectively.

***Transparency***

We live in a world where many of us wear masks, not always and everywhere, but with sufficient frequency that those who know us really well recognize our masks when they see them, even when the masks are not distinguishable to the unsuspecting eye. “Wearing masks” is not just a social-psychological phenomenon of the modern era. Even in the time of Clare and Francis, people disguised their true selves by “putting on masks” and assuming a manner of self-presentation that was far from transparent. Then as now, using this strategy, one does everything in one’s power not to reveal or disclose one’s true self - identity, feelings, thoughts, attitudes. The motives could range from no real sense of self or a negative self-image to hypocrisy and duplicity.

Recalling the words of Francis: “Who you are before God, that you are and nothing more,” we are reminded of the importance of transparency, a virtue that Clare embodied and modeled throughout her life. From her childhood on, Clare embraced a way of being in the world that involved living authentically, without masks. Writing a letter of encouragement to Agnes in 1235, Clare reminds her that only “one thing is necessary” (Lk 10:42). She urges her to not lose sight of where she began, to hold fast to her commitment, never ceasing to gaze, consider, contemplate and imitate the Beloved (II Ag 10-20). Listening to these words, as if for the first time, we might ask ourselves, how have we lived into the virtue of transparency to which we have been called? What masks, old and recently acquired, do we keep on hand, just in case there is a need – social, cultural, political, ecclesial, personal - to present ourselves as someone or something other than who or what we truly are?

Assuming that none of us has yet achieved the perfect living out of the virtue of transparency, let us take a moment to reflect on the following question: What mask(s) am I wearing at this time in my life? Once again, I will not be asking you to share any content with others as part of the exercise (though you may choose to do so with others at another moment). However, I will ask you to offer a general comment regarding the value of transparency and its real and perceived risks. **[Handout 2.2: Exercise - What mask am I wearing?**]

As we consider our own efforts to grow in the virtue of transparency, moved by the desire to be more transparent, what are the ways in which the example of Clare urges us on?

***Tenderness***

Reading Clare’s *Letters to Agnes*, the testimonies given by her sisters during interviews for the *Process of Canonization* and the *Legend of Clare*, one cannot help but be moved by the tenderness of Clare’s words and actions. Grounding her tenderness was an inner strength, indeed a grace that was sustained by Clare’s love of God and her sense of God’s love for her. This abundant love found expression in gestures, what might be called extravagant gestures, of concern, compassion, care and accompaniment. Extraordinarily sensitive to the needs of others, she was mindful of the sacredness and irreplaceability of every sister and, indeed, everyone with whom she was connected in some way.

Clare’s tenderness was not only generous, but also courageous and tested – as by fire – in the crucible of suffering. At the same time, it must be noted, that her tender way of proceeding was informed and influenced by the vulnerable resiliency that she experienced throughout the course of her own life, the vulnerable resiliency that she came to understand more deeply as she pondered and leaned into the mystery of the Incarnation.

As I think of this particular aspect of Clare’s virtue, and its significance for the times in which we are living today, in the United States, Jamaica, Bolivia and Brazil, I am reminded of the words of the South African poet, Dennis Brutus (1924-2009). Writing from his Robben Island jail cell, next to Nelson Mandela, he reflected upon on the ravages of apartheid, the dehumanization of his people, the demonization of his comrades and the fate of those made disposable by the terror and cruelty of some and the indifference and unknowing of others.

*Somehow We Survive*

By Dennis Brutus

*Somehow we survive*

*and tenderness, frustrated, does not wither.*

Investigating searchlights rake

our naked, unprotected contours;

over our heads the monolithic decalogue

of fascist prohibition glowers

and teeters for a catastrophic fall;

boots club the peeling door.

But somehow we survive

severance, deprivation, loss.

Patrols uncoil along the asphalt dark

hissing their menace to our lives,

most cruel, all our land is scarred with terror,

rendered unlovely and unlovable;

*sundered are we and all our passionate surrender*

*but somehow tenderness survive*[[1]](#footnote-1)

Clare possessed a tenderness that did not wither. I imagine that there was something about her tenderness that was contagious and if not contagious, appealing in a way that brought out the best in others. Consider Clare caring for the sisters who were ill, companioning those who awaited Sister Death, covering with blankets those she found shivering in the cold night air, lightening the rigors of the Rule for the young and the elderly, performing miracles of bread to nourish the hungry, wiping away the tears of the sorrowing, lifting up shattered spirits, reassuring the troubled (*Versified Legend* XXIX) and beholding with an intimate tenderness the Body of Christ – the Child of the Manger, the Crucified One of Calvary and the Risen One of the Upper Room. Consider Clare, not only as the *tender giver*, but also as the *tender receiver*, whose loving gratitude and receptivity created the conditions for a truly “holy exchange.”

As we consider the realities of our world, amidst wars and threats of war, amidst drought and famine, amidst corruption and terror, amidst every form of violence and exploitation, we know the urgent need as Franciscans to embrace our vocation to be and become instruments of God’s peace. Yet, I believe the example of Clare challenges us to enlarge our vision and understanding of God’s response to human suffering. Recalling the work of Simone Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction,” we are drawn into the mystery of every type of human affliction (*malheur*), whether essential or accidental. Confident in the tenderness of God and mindful of the suffering, great and small, constant and passing, that we encounter in our everyday existence, Clare’s example enables us to recognize and embrace our *Franciscan Clarian* vocation to be and become channels of divine tenderness wherever we find ourselves.

It goes without say that throughout our lives, much of what we learn when it comes to acquiring virtues, we learn from the example of others. And so it is, with learning to be tender. Admittedly, there always exists an innate capacity that is nurtured by God’s grace, however realized or unrealized it may be. Still, it is through the living example of others that the desire to imitate – to be and become what we behold - is awakened in our own hearts. But this can only happen, ***if we are open*** to the process of being attentive. As we come to consciousness (no matter at what age) and gradually discover the ways of in which tenderness begets tenderness.

I invite you now to consider an “exemplar of tenderness” who has awakened in you an awareness of the tenderness of God and the importance of tenderness in human relationships.

**[Handout 2.3: Exercise – Exemplars of Tenderness]**

1. From *Sirens, Knuckles, Boots*. Mbari Publications, 1963. See: <http://bulletproofpoets.com/uncategorized/south-africa-1963-somehow-we-survive-by-dennis/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)