

INSTRUMENTS OF PEACE

A Franciscan Resource Book for Justice,
Peace and Integrity of Creation

- Part 2: Specific Themes of Special Interest
 - 6. Women and the Charisms of Francis and Clare



Order of Friars Minor
Office of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation

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PART TWO

THEMES OF SPECIFIC INTEREST

As we said in the introduction to this section, this second part is composed of seven specific themes of great social and ecclesiastical importance at the present time. They could have been more but, not being able to make the book longer, we have selected these as the most apt and of greatest interest for living out our charism.

Each theme has a brief theoretical development that does not claim to be exhaustive but rather makes a presentation of the theme to stimulate reflection and action. This theoretical development of each theme is completed with the experiences and testimonies of friars from all over the world.

The theoretical part of each theme, having been written by a different author, can throw up some repetitions. However, we wanted to leave it this way because this section is not to be read at one sitting but rather each chapter should be consulted and worked on separately.

At the end of each theme or chapter a long questionnaire can be found. The reason, in effect, is to be found in its instrumental character. If these chapters are to be used for meetings on formation, both initial and on-going, or even in meetings of reflection with the laity, the long list of questions will better facilitate the group that is going to reflect.

Themes:

1. Option for the Poor
2. Peacemaking
3. Integrity of Creation / Environmental Justice
4. Life
5. Human Rights: Individual and Collective
6. Women and the Charisms of Francis and Clare
7. Dialogue: Ecumenical, Interreligious and Intercultural

6. Women and the Charisms of Francis and Clare



OFM General Constitutions, Article 4,1

The friars minor, joined as they are to the People of God, shall scrutinize the new signs of the times and always relate to a world in continual development.

Article 56,2

The first Order has the responsibility to preserve and to keep secure a spiritual unity with the nuns of the second and the third Orders and to promote their federations. However, their autonomy of life, especially in matters of governance, is always to be respected.

From the life of Francis ...

Francis courteously but firmly challenged many of his society's assumptions, especially ones about women. He felt that Clare was right to begin a form of religious life for women without a guaranteed income from rents. It took more than 40 years for the Pope to approve in definitive way the "Privilege of Poverty" as written in the definitive Rule of Saint Clare, and then it extended only to the Poor Clares at San Damiano!

According to friar-scholar Ignatius Brady, prior to Lateran Council IV, Clare and her sisters may have assisted Francis and his friars in caring for people suffering from leprosy. Francis gave a New Testament used by the friars to the mother of two friars; she had come asking an alms (2Cel 91). Another time he gave a poor woman a mantle (2Cel 92). Many miracles were worked on behalf of women (3Cel).

Although Francis forbade the friars from having “suspicious relationships” with women (RegB c.11), the examples of his own relationships with Clare and with Lady Jacoba indicate that not all relationships are “suspicious” Francis himself included married and unmarried women in the group whom the friars should invite “to persevere in the true faith and in a life of penance” (RegNB c.23).

Francis had no hesitation applying feminine imagery to himself and to the other friars. Describing his own community of friars he once told the pope about a woman who had a number of children by a king and then eventually sent them to claim their rightful inheritance (LM 3:10). The *Rule for Hermitages* divides the friars into Martha and Mary groups, exchanging roles at agreed-upon intervals (RegEr). “If a mother loves and cares for her child in the flesh, a friar should certainly love and care for his spiritual brother all the more tenderly” (RegB c.6). The law of the cloister did not apply when “Brother Jacoba” visited the dying Francis (LP 101).

Reflection

1. Different contexts

The enthusiasm generated by our appreciation for the towering spiritual genius of Francis of Assisi enables us to find aspects of his life and work to support countless hopes and ambitions. At the same time, this enthusiasm can lead us into the illusion that Francis (or Clare, for that matter) can offer models for every situation that challenges us today. When we speak of Francis in relationship to women--the women of his family, city, movement--this danger becomes especially evident. It is difficult to discover with accuracy the reality of his relationships with women in the primary sources and the layers of interpretation to which those documents are subject. It is equally difficult to know what parts of the questions we ask are attributes of a worldview made possible by modern philosophy and science. This worldview, which undergirds our striving to reincarnate the Franciscan ideal in our times, contains many elements that would leave Francis scratching his head in wonder and, for all we know, dismay.

The Franciscan who asks the question today moves, lives and breathes in a world in which a convergence of concern and commitment by and for women is everywhere to be seen. On the world plane we have the testimony of the United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. Participants returned to their native lands with spellbinding stories of unity in diversity experienced and celebrated by the thousands of women who attended. Within the Church we see new efforts by John Paul II to address the concerns of women: his *Letter to Women* (1995) and *Mulieris Dignitatem* (an encyclical published in 1988). In addition, regional episcopal conferences, bodies of major superiors of religious and organizations of the laity have written documents or conducted studies that address both the injustices done to women and the need to correct these within various cultural perspectives. It is important to understand that in a publication such as this one a general examination of the issue must be critiqued within cultural settings that vary significantly. Friars working in regions dominated by patriarchal institutions will find a different mentality and reality than those who minister in cultures where matriarchal foundations continue to influence belief and behavior. With these cautions in mind, let us turn to the story of Francis and ask how he encountered women as he tried to walk in the footprints of Jesus.

2. The Cultural Context of Francis

The ecclesiastical world in which Francis came to adulthood held human nature in low esteem. Humankind was understood to be full of weakness and depravity, rushing headlong towards damnation with only a glimmer of hope that redemption could be won and preserved in the frailty of life. Monastic writers who tried to support the church's growing concern about clerical celibacy produced damaging tracts that presented women as the incarnation of Eve--mother of sin and betrayal. Roman legal structures denied women active roles in civic life and canonized private virtue and fidelity to father, husband and children. Thus the freedom of women in regions where Roman law held sway was highly mitigated and women were often disposed of in service to ambitions of male heads of families and clans. At the same time, the Church did provide some protection against forced marriages and the option of religious consecration. The troubadour culture newly emerging in medieval Europe was also promoting a refinement of taste and sensibility that would ennoble--at least in theory--the position of woman in the social order. Francis grew up within the schizophrenic environment that alternately exalted and demonized women.

When we study his biographies, we find ourselves asking, "Just how many women played a significant role in the life of Francis?" Three immediately emerge: his mother, Pica, Clare and Lady Jacoba. However, if we continue our search we find numerous other women make up the *dramatis personae* of his story but they often pass across the stage without name and without a proper voice. Consider the women of Greccio he reportedly admired, the nuns of San Severino, Praxedes of Rome, the five candidates he presented to Clare for her Order. What of the entire community of San Damiano, who revered him and eagerly waited for his rare visits and sermons in the later years? Going further in our search we begin to notice how often women are the center of the *Tract on Miracles*. How many women answered his knock when he begged in Assisi and other villages? How many women stood before him in cathedrals and piazzas? Did he never speak to them? Were there no conversations with the hundreds of women who became the early Sisters of Penance?

3. The Importance of Clare and Jacoba for Francis

Whatever we conjecture about this wide world of women, we know that two women occupy a central role of relationship and friendship with Francis: Clare and Jacoba. What do we learn from these bonds which clearly endured nearly a lifetime? Perhaps the most significant witness to the relationship with Clare is recorded in the *Form of Life* and the *Last Will*. In these short statements he affirms that he understood Clare to be his equal in vocation and dedication. He mandates a singular equality in treatment for Clare and her sisters, placing concern for them on the same level with concern for the fraternity. Clare was so conscious of the enormous power of that mutuality and that promise that she carefully enshrined it in the heart of her own Rule (Chapter VI).

Since Jesus was the model for all that Francis lived, did he find comfort in those encounters in which Jesus stepped beyond the pale in his encounters with women and did he equally find instruction in those passages that tell of the women who followed and ministered to Jesus? Did these indications that Jesus was willing to risk censure by association with women in his ministry allow Francis the freedom he needed to believe and behave in the ways that he did?

4. Francis' Relationship with Women--the positive and the difficulties

The biographies also allow us to see that Francis' relationship with women was not always calm, comforting and untroubled. Some of the stories left to us portray warm and sympathetic encounters. The *Legend of Perugia* tells of his visit at San Damiano for treatment and his composition of the *Audite*, a lovely instruction full of affectionate concern (LP 42,43). The *Fioretti* preserve the wonderful, parable-like story of the supper celebrated at the Portiuncula (Fior. 15). We know of his visits to Jacoba in Rome as reflected in his dying requests to her. A remarkable testament to the power of this relationship is forever captured in the placement of her mortal remains directly opposite his in the crypt chapel of his basilica.

However, we cannot afford to pass over those stories that portray a different image, a Francis who appears anxious, obdurate and insensitive to his feminine friends. We recall the sermon he gave at San Damiano which appears to deny the sisters the comfort they expected as he pours ashes upon himself, recites the *Miserere* and departs in silence (2Cel 207). There are negative statements about women attributed to him that clearly reflect the misogynist tendencies of clerical literature of the period (2Cel 112). We know, too, that the preservation of chastity was a struggle for Francis and that his ambivalence about his own passionate nature and its potential for wrongdoing occupied him mightily. This interior battle would have made a rosy view of relationships with women impossible for Francis. That it did not prevent him from establishing bonds of radical equality and affectionate admiration is itself a miracle of Gospel grace.

Therefore, we can affirm that Francis was an extraordinary human being who was not entirely free of the anti-feminine propaganda of the church of his time and the generally negative view of human nature--particularly its sexual dimension--that was a pervasive thread of Christian teaching and prejudice from Augustine's time to that of the Middle Ages. Francis created a form of life that required celibacy but dispensed with the protections of monastic enclosure. His increasing worry about the conduct of friars less gifted and clear in their dedication is reflected in his *Rule* and his biographies. The new influence of courtly literature and troubadour music appeals to the would-be knight; his language and imagery borrow the refinements and the romance of this vision of men and women bound in delicate alliances for noble reasons. The strength and heroic fidelity to the Gospel of certain women in his life draw from him admiration and dedicated friendship that is public and articulate. He draws women by the scores into the ambiance of his movement to establish the Gospel as the norm of all human endeavor. He welcomes these women no less than their masculine counterparts and explicitly includes them in his formation plans (*Letters to the Faithful*).

Francis is thus very helpful to us in the following ways:

1. He offers deep spiritual insight about the interrelationship of all beings in feminine and masculine terms (*Canticle*).
2. He demonstrates an ability to transcend cultural barriers for the sake of the Gospel's truth.
3. He leaves us a record of his deep friendships with Clare and Jacoba; this is no small consolation in our searching.

We need, on the other hand, to be careful to understand that Francis does not provide answers for some of our dilemmas:

1. The evolution of the role of women in an industrialized Western world, the new

awareness of women in all cultures except the most primitive, and the uncharted territory of life in postmodern and post-Marxist societies is our problem to solve. Francis did not walk where we must now walk. The veritable explosion of awareness of the sexual nature of human life and the explicit attention it receives in all forms of media pose unprecedented challenges for us.

2. The difficulties that women encounter in the church where patriarchal and sexist prejudice have often demeaned their persons and reduced their participation are creating serious rifts in some areas. The call of the brothers of Francis to be a source of reconciliation and justice for women is an urgent one in today's ecclesial community.

Finally, we should affirm that one sign of the creative faithfulness of the Franciscan family in our time is the increase in structures and occasions for Franciscan brothers and sisters to minister side by side. Today we see much work in collaborative projects internal to our Orders and the structures at international and continental levels that brings us face to face in pursuit of our vocation and cultivation of our voice in the world community. For all that Francis offers us a pattern and inspiration let us be grateful. For our own responsibility to discern what evangelical energy we need to walk as once Francis and Clare did in the flaming garden of the Portiuncula, let us be responsible.

Margaret Carney, O.S.F.

Examples from the lives of the friars...

If St. Francis were to return today and sit in on some of the many seminars and international conferences held recently on the role of women in the Church and in society--he would probably find it all rather hard to comprehend! Nowhere have the cultural parameters shifted more over the centuries since he and St. Clare founded their congregations than in this area of 'women's rights.'

Friars in Asia have taken the lead in attempting to address these changes of attitude. The Franciscan Conferences of Asia and Oceania (FCAO) decided to focus for two years on the situation of women in that part of the world and publish a report on their findings. The two-year investigation process upon which the report was based is widely seen as one of the most farsighted and constructive steps ever taken at conference level to promote understanding and action in the field of women's rights. Friars in the thirteen provinces of the region sent out detailed questionnaires to compile information on the status and social conditions of women within their countries. Each of these reports was in turn reviewed by three different women within that region. The results formed the basis of a seminar in Sydney, Australia, attended by the thirteen FCAO ministers, together with guests from other countries. Five women from different Asian nations and two Australians also joined the friars for the discussions. The second half of the meeting focused on the contribution of both Francis and Clare to the origins of the Franciscan movement as well as women's contribution to the future of Franciscan life. Because of the diversity of cultures among the nations within the FCAO, there were both different and common problems expressed by the women and the friars from across the region. Economic injustices, second-class citizenship, lack of respect and lack of awareness were mentioned in practically every report. The reflections of the women who responded to the reports and of the women who participated in the meeting reinforced in very personal ways the views and the pain expressed throughout the provincial

reports and challenged the friars to respond in creative ways. Suggestions range from the very practical setting up of child care or health and skills training programs to a complete revision of the traditional and oppressive interpretations of the Bible, which have been used to support the suppression of women's dignity over the centuries. The reports stress that pity for the plight of women caught up in poverty, prostitution or oppressive relationships is not enough. Friars must lead the way towards true empowerment and cooperation by making a radical examination of their own personal attitudes to the women they relate to in their daily lives.

The report concludes with two stories from ANTONIO EGIGUREN who worked at St. Clare's Hospice for the dying in Lamsai, **Thailand**. One story tells of a Muslim woman, forced into drugs and prostitution in Bangkok by her truck driver husband. Abandoned by her family, she is dying of AIDS alone in Lamsai. The other story is of a young woman of Chinese origin who also married a truck driver in Bangkok but was unaware of her husband's drug addiction and repeated infidelity. Within one year her only son died of AIDS, followed by her husband at the age of 31. She herself does not have long to live. Yet asked about her attitude to her husband, she replies "I was taught by my mother from childhood to accept that men are all promiscuous and too weak to overcome their sexual desires. I've lived up to that teaching so it does not hurt to know that my husband liked going with other girls."

Men and women Franciscans, secular and religious alike are increasingly aware that education is the key to changing such attitudes - education that may often appear in contradiction to prevailing religious and cultural traditions. For too long, they say, the contribution of St. Clare to the Franciscan charism has been hidden in the shadow of St. Francis - a fact that only began to emerge during the recent 800th anniversary celebrations. Until this fact is acknowledged, women will never achieve the equal recognition and responsibility they seek in the life of the Church. Franciscan Sister Maria Elena Martinez is one woman who has benefited from changing attitudes towards women in the Church. Currently the Novice Directress for the Sisters of St. Francis of Penance and Christian Charity in California, **U.S.A.**, Maria Elena was born to Mexican-American parents. In her early twenties she joined a Franciscan community and was sent for training as a Spiritual Director and she learned much about the challenges of multiculturalism. Teaching later at a high school in Los Angeles, U.S.A., Maria Elena was asked to serve as spiritual director at a local pre-novitiate community which could not find a friar to fill the post. Maria Elena agreed, and though she did not live with the friars, she was able to eat dinner with them daily, serve as spiritual director and offer classes. As Hispanic men from El Salvador and Mexico were also entering the novitiate in large numbers for the first time in this period, Maria Elena continued to serve as part of the Province's "formation team" for twelve years. According to Maria Elena, working with the Hispanic men was especially rewarding "because of their way of relating to their mothers and other women in their lives--they are far more open and vulnerable in the presence of a woman confidant. For many of the Anglo-American men it was more difficult. It was a process of guiding them and listening to them especially in areas where I was able to mediate the clashes between the Anglo and Hispanic cultures." Eventually Maria Elena also began to coordinate the orientation program for the province's "Guatemala Experience." After novitiate the friars move to the outskirts of Guatemala City where they work in a poor parish operated by the Central American province and live in an inserted house built, quite literally, on top of a garbage dump. Before the friars begin this experience, Maria Elena works with small groups of them, dealing with anger,

loneliness and sexuality--issues that are certain to surface while living in a foreign country. After the friars have been in Guatemala for a few months, Maria Elena meets with each of them individually. Her straightforward approach is a great blessing for many of them who are able to openly express their doubts and concerns. Upon their return to the United States, Maria Elena continues to serve as Spiritual Director for those who try to apply their experience in Guatemala to new ways of thinking about justice, peace and ecology in their own communities. Though some of the friars later move into comfortable positions within the province and become less open to the idea of dialogue with women, Marie Elena believes it is essential to keep challenging them--just as Clare challenged Francis on attitudes and the ability to live in mutual respect for all men and women.

“Some men are deeply concerned, but others don't accept the need for women's empowerment - they're afraid to let go of their power, in some traditions and cultures especially.” That's been the experience of Rose Fernando, Justice and Peace Coordinator for the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary. Originally from **Sri Lanka**, the first country to elect a woman prime minister back in the 1950's, she spends much of her time travelling around conducting workshops on justice and peace issues. Dressed in her knee-length gray habit and veil, her hands demurely folded in her lap, Rose is a far cry from that stereotype image of the radical Church feminist demanding the ordination of women priests. Yet when questioned on the promotion of women, her words and her enthusiastic expression tell quite a different story. “Everywhere I go I see women becoming more aware of their situations and speaking out with courage,” she says, “even in those cultures where women have kept quiet until now. In Asia, for example, all the different world religions have traditionally conspired to keep women down. Wherever I go I also insist so much on educating men and women together; it really is the key to change.” And things are changing for the better--albeit slowly--even within the Church, according to Rose. She cites the example of a 91-year-old sister she knows in Australia who has recently begun using inclusive language during the daily psalms and prayers.

When asked about her about her experience of cooperation among friars, sisters and lay Franciscans at international level, Rose replied: “I went to the U.N. conference on women in Beijing as a member of the non-governmental organization Franciscans International and I'm not too sure how many men really understand what we are trying to say - that all we want is partnership in society as in the Church”. Her own personal experience of lobbying at this level has been very positive, both in Beijing in September 1995 and at the Food and Agriculture Organization summit on hunger held in Rome in November 1996. Franciscans International is a new and concrete commitment to working together on issues of common concern.

Denmark is one country where that kind of cooperation is also happening at the national level, according to Marianne Powell, Justice and Peace coordinator for the International Council of the Secular Franciscan Order (SFO). A former University professor of English, she now works in education for the Diocese of Copenhagen, the only Catholic diocese in Denmark. The small Catholic population and the shortage of priests, in her view, is part of the reason why lay men and women have learned to work together so well in that part of the world. She herself was involved in the setting up of the Secular Franciscan Order in Denmark in the early 80's. In the decade and a half since then, some seven fraternities have sprung up with over 50 members, but their small numbers make cooperation with religious essential if they are to work effectively. At the

international level she helped to compile a survey on secular orders in other parts of the world. “The findings were varied; in some countries lay people are well organized with their Franciscan brothers and sisters. In others there are no official structures but the Franciscans are working together under diocesan justice and peace commissions. My role is to create greater awareness among these groups of the issues they can cooperate on.” In areas of justice and peace, she believes cooperation is the natural way of working together but she concedes, “That vision is still not shared by many men and women in much of the developing world.”

As a former friar KENGO KOBAYASHI in **Japan** was known as a supporter of women’s rights - in particular the rights of the most deprived women there, the immigrants. Many thousands of women leave the Philippines each year and flock to Japan in search of jobs that will enable them to support their struggling families back home. Some are drawn into the entertainment business, others are bought as brides by wealthy Japanese men, others work as domestics but all of them run the risk of exploitation by unscrupulous employers or “owners.” As head of Yokohama Solidarity Center for Migrants, Kengo can sometimes be seen demonstrating in the streets on behalf of these women. To help them to organize and empower themselves, he has also compiled a comprehensive manual for migrants detailing their rights under Japanese law and the organizations they can turn to for help. The book, published in August 1996, covers everything from entry and residence permits to labor and health issues, in particular the reproductive health of women, as well as laws relating to marriage, divorce and the education of children. For Kengo, working with these poor women has produced an unexpected conversion: seeing the world from the viewpoint of poor women and to accompany rather than lead them.

General Constitutions

Article 56:1 Recognizing fully that we have the same charism and very close mutual relationships with the nuns of the second and the third Orders of St. Francis, the brothers should always show them diligent care and concern.

Other references: articles 51 and 58.

Discussion Questions

1. Have Franciscan religious women expanded your appreciation of your Franciscan vocation? Have women in the SFO done the same?
2. Have women Franciscans (religious or SFO) challenged blindspots in your Franciscan vision? If so, how did you respond to her, them?
3. Are any Franciscan women your peers? Does that influence your apostolic work, daily conversation or life in your local fraternity?
4. Does your local community cooperate with nearby groups of Franciscan women? Does your provincial fraternity do the same?
5. Has your province recently invited a Franciscan woman to address a provincial meeting or lead a provincial retreat?
6. Do you or any fellow friars have women Franciscans as spiritual directors? How has that influenced your/their living out the Franciscan vocation?
7. What contribution does Clare make to your understanding and living your Franciscan vocation?
8. What contributions do women make to the faith of our Christian communities today?

9. What contributions are being made to the Church by women in religious life today?
10. What are the feminine contributions to ideas of God and the Church? What special contribution can women make to our entering the world of the poor?
11. Are there feminine values that can enrich the various forms of the following of Jesus?
12. Does the situation of women in the Church give them an advantage in understanding and living the evangelical life?
13. Can women play an important part in evangelizing with affection and sensitivity? What unique contributions can Christian women make towards the renewal of the Church?