

# Topic 6: Agnes of Prague, Princess of Bohemia (1211-82)

## I. Overview of Topic 6:

A) To demonstrate the significance of Agnes as princess of Bohemia to gain papal approval for a *Form of Life* that was not dependent on the ownership of property

## II. Background of Agnes of Prague

A) Agnes of Prague was from Bohemia's royal Premyslid dynasty, born to King Ottakar I and his second wife Queen Constance

B) Agnes rejected a series of suitors, including marriage to Emperor Frederick II

C) Francis's brothers came to Prague in 1225 and Agnes built a *convento* for them

D) Agnes used her access to royal funds to establish three foundations:

1) A hospice for the sick of Prague

2) A monastery for women in the manner of Clare

3) A residence for the brothers who would minister to them

E) Agnes requested Pope Gregory IX's approval for sisters from Clare's community at San Damiano for a similar foundation of Poor Ladies in Prague

## III. Importance of Agnes to Clare's story

A) Clare was in her 40s, and Agnes in her 30s when Agnes's father, King Ottakar I died

B) King Frederick II, asked Agnes's brother to marry Agnes

C) In 1234, Agnes, seven other noble women from Bohemia, and five women from Assisi entered the monastery in Prague

D) In 1234 Clare sent word of her congratulations, known as *The First Letter of Clare*

## IV. Agnes's persistence to gain papal approval to live according to Clare's privilege of poverty

A) 1234: Gregory IX appointed Agnes as abbess

B) 1235: Gregory denied Agnes's request to separate the hospice and monastery

C) 1235: Clare advised Agnes to skirt Pope Gregory's directive for the example of Elias

D) 1235: Gregory referred to the Order of San Damian of Assisi, his effort to unify all groups of women religious

E) 1238: Gregory's retraction granted Agnes the right to separate the hospice and

F) 1238: Gregory conceded that fasting like the Cistercians is impractical in Prague

G) 1238: Gregory refused to retract the Rule of Saint Benedict for that of Saint Francis

H) 1243: Pope Innocent IV refused Agnes's request to delete the phrase in their rule declaring obedience to Saint Benedict

## V. The rest of Agnes's story

A) 1250s: Clare died in 1253, Pope Alexander gave Agnes some concessions to her *Form of Life*

B) 1270s: Political upheaval: Ottakar II is killed in war against the Hapsburgs, famine and floods follow

C) 1282, March 2: Agnes's death, *A Legend of Agnes* is written before 1328

D) 1419: The Hussite wars forced the Poor Clares to leave Prague

E) Properties are seized under communist control

F) Immediately after her death, devotion to Agnes began among Czech people along with the belief that someday Agnes will bring good to the nation

- G) 1989, November 12: Agnes is canonized in Rome, her feast day is March 2  
H) Simultaneously, the “Velvet revolution” as Communist government resigned; celebration in Wenceslas Square in Prague and peace came to the Czech Republic

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Name likeness and differences between Clare of Assisi and Agnes of Prague.
2. Why is the papacy so involved in Agnes and the life of her monastery in Prague?
3. Why does Agnes become important for Clare as she seeks approval for her *Form of Life*?

# Topic 7: The Soul of Clare: The First and Second Letter to Agnes of Prague

## I. Overview of Topic 7:

A) **To understand Clare’s letters as a treasure of her spirituality which is based on the central mysteries of the Christian religion: Incarnation, Redemption and Resurrection.**

## II. Introduction to Clare’s Four Letters

A) Letters, the epistolary tradition, were the only public written expressions available for women

1) The letters all follow the classical structure of letter writing with a formal greeting, body and closing

B) Clare’s letters were not personally intended for Agnes, but directed to her entire community as spiritual direction and practical advice about their manner of life

C) The occasion for the First Letter is Agnes’s entrance into the enclosure in 1234 in the Monastery she built in Prague

## III. Clare’s First Letter to Agnes of Prague

A) **Clare’s First Letter reflects on the meaning of Agnes’s commitment in terms of an exchange: the things of heaven instead of the things of earth**

B) Clare exudes joy upon hearing of Agnes’s decision to follow the Poor Christ (lines 1:3-7), the central theme of the letter

C) Clare describes the spiritual benefits of Agnes’s commitment to a life of virginity (1:8-11)

D) Clare demonstrates that virginity and poverty, in imitation of the “Poor Crucified” free Agnes for service to others (1:12-14). Clare personifies Lady Poverty as did Francis by addressing poverty, “O God-Centered poverty” (1:15-17)

E) Clare concludes the letter reiterating the theme of exchange, promising that Agnes will receive a hundred-fold instead of one (1:29-32)

## IV. Clare’s Second Letter to Agnes of Prague

A) **Clare’s Second Letter in 1235 is a response to Agnes’s request regarding Pope Gregory IX’s suggestion that Agnes unite her hospice which generated some income with the monastery to secure its stability. Such a move was incompatible with the vision of Agnes and Clare to live without common ownership of property.**

B) Clare begins by praising Agnes’s perseverance, the major theme of the letter, to hold fast to the footprints of Jesus, before giving Agnes pastoral advice (2:3-11)

C) Acknowledging that Gregory presented Agnes with a “stumbling block,” Clare counsels Agnes respectfully to ignore his directive in favor of Brother Elias’s example who technically lived without ownership in placing the Basilica of Saint Francis under papal jurisdiction (2:15-17)

D) The remainder of the letter instructs Agnes in spiritual transformation through prayer. Clare suggests that rather than become bitter over Gregory's action, Agnes should direct her thoughts upon God (2:18-20)

E) Clare outlines a method of prayer to gaze, consider and contemplate the image of God. Clare reminds Agnes of Jesus' earthly suffering that brought heavenly glory (2:18-23)

F) Clare reminds Agnes of the depth of human suffering endured by Jesus

## **REVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Clare seems to "count the ways" in which God's love for Agnes is evident. What has God done for Agnes that demonstrates God's special care for her?

2. What did Pope Gregory IX suggest that Agnes do which was contrary to her desire to follow Clare in her new way of poverty?

3. Why does Clare advise that rather than following the directive of Pope Gregory IX, Agnes might better follow the way of Elias, Francis's successor?

## *Topic 8: The Soul of Clare: The Third Letter to Agnes of Prague*

### **I. Overview of Topic 8:**

**A) To observe how Clare views the Virgin Mary as a Christ-bearer, and accordingly how all human beings also carry Christ spiritually in their bodies. In regard to the monastery's practice of fasting, once more Clare advises Agnes to do what Francis did**

### **II. The discipline of fasting**

A) The Third Letter follows Agnes's inquiry regarding Pope's Gregory IX's directive that Agnes's monastery in Prague, follow the Benedictine/Cistercian fasting practices prohibiting meat

B) Fasting was promoted for medieval women as a disciplinary practice to cleanse them of the internal bodily evil associated with the functions of child-bearing: menstrual blood, birth and lactation

C) Clare's health seems to have been damaged by excessive fasting. Obedient to the pleas of her sisters and Francis, Clare developed more moderate spiritual disciplines

D) Agnes knew that in Prague's northern climate meat substitutes were not only impractical, but extremely difficult to obtain and not in accord with the way the poor lived

### **III. Clare articulates her joy for Agnes's spiritual progress**

A) Clare encourages Agnes in her spiritual progress (3:3-14)

B) Agnes possesses "the treasure hidden in the field" (3:7)

C) Clare considers Agnes to be "a co-worker of God" (3:8)

D) Clare recommends that Agnes ought not to dwell on her disappointments, but rather turn to God for comfort (3:10-14)

### **IV. Clare's reflection on Mary who bears Christ**

A) First, Clare portrays the pregnant womb of Mary as an "enclosure" (3:18)

B) Next she imagines the virgin as mother with the child on her lap and considers the sacredness of life (3:19)

C) Clare designates those who fail to recognize the sacred nature of human life as enemies (3:20)

D) Then Clare makes the connection to the sacredness of all who carry the life of God in their souls (3:21-26)

E) Finally, Clare tells Agnes she also carries the life of God in her soul and like Mary brings God to others

1) Clare refers to the doctrine of the divine indwelling (3:23)

2) The concept of *Imitatio Maria* was popularized in the Middle Ages

3) The fourteenth century mystics, including Ruysbroek, developed the spiritual concept of giving birth to God in the soul

#### **V. Clare's practical advice about fasting in the manner of Francis**

A) At the end of the letter, Clare advises Agnes that the Poor Ladies of San Damiano are guided by the customs of Francis and his brothers

B) Clare suggests that Agnes follow Francis's admonition to prepare special foods for feasts, and to except the weak and sick from austere fasting (3:30-37)

#### **VI. Conclusion of the Third Letter**

A) Clare forgives the frailness of human nature: "But our flesh is not bronze, nor is our strength that of stone" (3:38-39)

B) Clare begs Agnes to refrain from "indiscreet austerity" (3:40)

C) Clare assures Agnes that she praises God by her "very life," reasonable service," and "sacrifice always seasoned with salt" (3:41)

D) Similarity of Clare's teaching to the way *Isaiah* 58:1-9 presents God's desire for the manner of fasting.

### **REVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. What are some of the reasons Agnes brings Clare such enormous joy?

2. How does Clare connect Mary as Jesus' mother to every human person?

3. Rather than impose a severe routine of fasting and bodily discipline, what does Clare suggest as a better means of giving praise to God?

## **Topic 9: The Soul of Clare: The Fourth Letter to Agnes of Prague**

### **I. Overview of Topic 9:**

A) Clare's revelation about how the Crucified Christ has been central in her spiritual journey

### **II. Clare's approaching death in 1253 prompts The Fourth Letter to Agnes**

A) Clare's greeting and message for Agnes appears to flow from her contemplation of heaven as her death nears

B) The theme of the letter shows how the visible Christ is the way to the invisible God

C) The language, filled with images of heaven, portrays Agnes as the *Agnus Dei*, lamb of God (4:1-3)

D) Clare's builds her letter upon her vision and description of the heavenly Jerusalem (4:9-14)

### **III. The medieval mirror as the central metaphor and foundation of Clare's analogy**

A) Clare portrays earth as a reflection of heaven (4: 9-14)

B) Jesus is a mirror of God, described as the mirror without blemish (4:14)

- C) Clare recommends that Agnes look to Jesus to whom she is espoused (4:8)
- D) Referring to her method of prayer, Clare directs Agnes to see herself reflected from the humanity of Jesus Christ and adorn herself with his virtues (4:15-17)
- E) Clare declares that Agnes will visualize Jesus' poverty, humility, and love (4:18)

#### **IV. The border, surface, and depth of the medieval mirror**

- A) The border (4:18-20)
  - 1) Most unclear reflection, the outside rim, the beginning of the mirror
  - 2) Jesus's poverty is most apparent at the border
  - 3) The mystery of Incarnation corresponds to the border (4:20-21)
  - 4) The beginning of the spiritual life is known as a time of purgation
- B) The surface (4:2-23)
  - 1) Clearer part: the middle, the interior of the mirror
  - 2) Jesus' humility becomes apparent at the surface (4:21)
  - 3) The mystery of suffering and death corresponds to the surface (4:22)
  - 4) The second stage of spiritual growth is known as a time of illumination
- C) The depth, center, heart (4:24-26)
  - 1) The clearest deep center of the mirror
  - 2) Charity, or Jesus's love in his death and resurrection, the other side of death
  - 3) The mystery of Jesus death, no greater love than this, corresponds to the depth of the mirror
  - 4) The final stage in the spiritual life is contemplation, or mystical union with God

#### **V. Jesus, the mirror of God, speaks from the cross recounting his suffering**

- A) Clare frames the human response in the language of the *Song of Songs* (4:30-31)
- B) The feet represent the first effort, to run in the fragrance of the wine cellar
- C) The left hand of God symbolizes the earthly journey; the embrace by God's right hand represents the heavenly embrace of God in heaven
- D) The kiss of the mouth symbolizes complete union with God, as the Incarnation is said to be the kiss of humanity and divinity

#### **VI. Clare's final words to Agnes of Prague**

- A) Clare assures Agnes her memory is indelibly inscribed on "the tablets of my heart" (4:33)
- B) Clare protests that her words fail in expressing her love for Agnes, and implores "the tongue of the Spirit" to speak in her behalf (4:35)
- C) Clare commends herself and her sisters to the prayers of Agnes and her sisters (4:38)
- D) Clare bids Agnes farewell until "we meet at the glory of the great God" (4:39)
- E) Agnes expresses gratitude to Brother Amatus and Brother Bonagura, the carriers of her letters.

### **REVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. What insight into the depth of Clare's union with God is revealed by the Fourth Letter?
2. Describe Clare's method of prayer as she moves from the gaze of the outer senses to the mental consideration of the inner senses, and to the love for God held within her heart.
3. In the fourth letter, Clare imparts a lifetime of wisdom about the spiritual life to Agnes of Prague and her sisters. What aspects of her understanding are helpful for your spiritual journey?