



St. Clare Of Assisi (1193/1194 – 1253)

When she was 18 years old, Clare left behind the wealth and ease of her noble family and embraced the radical poverty of Jesus, which she had heard St. Francis praise in the streets of Assisi. For her remaining 41 years, she struggled against incredible odds to be true to her ideals. When church authorities ordered her to relax the austerity of her way of life, she patiently insisted that women could follow Gospel ideals as well as men. Two days before her death, she finally received papal approval for the rule she had written for her followers.

Like other women religious of her day, Clare and her companions lived within a strict monastic enclosure. What made them different was their rigorous vow of poverty, which forbade even communal possessions. They supported themselves by the work of their hands and depended on alms for the rest. They wore the simplest clothing and fasted every day except for Christmas and Sundays. In all things they strove to maintain among themselves “the unity of mutual love and peace.”

For 28 years, Clare was continually ill, and often confined to her bed. Even in bed she insisted on doing her share of work. One legend tells of how she dropped a narrow roll of linen cloth she was sewing, and how it rolled too far from her bed for her to reach. The monastery cat, with which she is pictured in this icon, retrieved the cloth for her so that she could finish the work. This story reflects the profound closeness to creation and all other creatures which lies at the core of Franciscan spirituality.

Clare led her austere life with the same small group of women for 41 years, only leaving her tiny monastery once. In spite of her illness and other problems, in spite of the sorrow she must have felt as she watched many of Francis’ male followers abandon his ideals after his death, her writings are filled with peace and joy. She challenges us to re-examine our own goals, which often bring us stress and misery, as she speaks of moving through life “with swift pace, light step and unswerving feet, so that even your steps stir up no dust...” [Clare of Assisi: *The Lady: Early Documents*, p. 48, *The Second Letter to Agnes of Prague*, revised edition and translation by Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap., 2006]