

Readings: *Philippians 3: 8 – 14; Psalm 15(16); Matthew 19: 27 – 29.*

Clare was born into a moderately wealthy family in about AD 1193. She seems to have developed a sense of vocation to a religious life and to have resisted family pressure to be married. In 1212 she heard Francis (who had already begun to establish the community of “Lesser Brothers”) preach the Lent sermons. Inspired by his message, she finally rejected the idea of marriage. At mass in Assisi Cathedral on Palm Sunday, 17th March, the Bishop brought her an olive branch. On the following night she left home and went to the Portiuncula – the house on the ‘Little Portion’ of land outside Assisi where Francis and his community lived. There she renounced her possessions and dressed as a nun. When her family and friends heard of this they came and tried to force her to return home. She resisted and soon Francis took her to a convent further away, where she was joined by her younger sister Agnes. There they were trained in the religious life. In 1215 they moved to a house near the church of San Damiano in Assisi (where Francis had heard the command of the crucified Christ “Repair my house”). It is said that Clare remained there all the time until her death. She became the abbess of a new community, which soon spread, setting up houses in Italy, France and Bohemia, and, from 1286, in England.

The sisters (first known as the ‘Order of Poor Ladies’ but later as ‘Poor Clares’) lived under a very strict rule. They slept on the ground, went barefoot, never ate meat and kept silence unless need or charity required them to speak. This severe regime inevitably led to poor health, and at a later time Francis and the Bishop required Clare to relax the regime.

During Clare’s lifetime disputes arose about poverty. She wanted her sisters to follow the teaching of Francis, who wished his brothers to own nothing either individually or in common, but this led to conflict both with some Church officials. In 1228 Clare obtained from the Pope the “Privilege of Poverty” for the community of San Damiano, by which they were allowed to live entirely on alms and no church authority could compel them to own anything.

After a long illness Clare died at San Damiano on 11 August 1253. She was canonized two years later, and in 1260 her body was transferred to the newly built church of Santa Chiara in Assisi.

At present there are some 20,000 Poor Clare sisters in over seventy countries.