

“Gaze upon that mirror each day.”

“Let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus...” (Heb.12:1-2)



In an article on the spirituality of St. Teresa of Calcutta, Capuchin priest and theologian, Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, OFM. Cap., recounts that during Holy Week in 1993, Mother Teresa wrote these words to the sisters of her order:

“I worry some of you have not really met Jesus—one to one—you and Jesus alone. We may spend time in chapel—but have you seen with the eyes of your soul how he looks at you with love? Do you really know the living Jesus—not from books but from being with him in your heart? Have you heard the loving words he speaks to you?...Never give up this daily intimate contact with Jesus as the real living person—not just the idea.”¹

Fr. Cantalamessa goes on to affirm that, “Jesus was not an abstraction for Mother Teresa, a set of doctrines or dogmas or the remembrance of a person who lived at another time. He was the real, living Jesus, someone to gaze at in our hearts and whom we allow to gaze at us.”² His choice of the word that in English we translate as “gaze” was not accidental or arbitrary. As a Franciscan, Fr. Cantalamessa almost certainly has in mind the writings and inspiration of the great Franciscan saint and foundress, Clare of Assisi.

St. Clare’s writings are an indispensable treasure among the Franciscan early documents. The genre in which she excelled was the letter. In particular, we have four of her letters to her Franciscan sister, St. Agnes of Prague. When Fr. Cantalamessa speaks of “gazing,” he alludes to Clare’s correspondence with Agnes. For example, in her Second Letter to Agnes, Clare writes,

Look upon Him Who became contemptible for you,
and follow Him, making yourself contemptible in this world
for Him.
Most noble Queen,
gaze,
consider,
contemplate
desiring to imitate Your Spouse³

In her Third Letter and Fourth Letter to Agnes, Clare encourages gazing in a particular way, employing the image of a mirror. She writes in her Third Letter:

Place your mind before the mirror of eternity!
Place your soul in the brilliance of glory!

And in her Fourth Letter:

Gaze upon that mirror each day,
O Queen and Spouse of Jesus Christ,
and continually study your face in it

In the medieval world, mirrors, although far from the flawless reflectors we have today, were nevertheless precious and expensive objects. As such, the mirror for Clare was a metaphor for Christ, “the mirror of eternity.” The contemporary Franciscan theologian Ilia Delio, OSF, writes, “To gaze is not simply to see. Rather, to gaze is to be drawn into the object one sees.”⁴ When we gaze into the mirror of Christ, we see *him*. We contemplate *him*. We become more like *him*, and that transformation is the image reflected back to the gazer. Such gazing is one way of maintaining the “daily, intimate contact” with Jesus that Mother Teresa so ardently wished for her sisters in the letter excerpted above. Clare teaches how to “really know the living Jesus.”

St. Clare was a mystic, and the experience of her mystical relationship with Christ can appear difficult and challenging to us who live in a world preoccupied with the material and superficial. Nevertheless, every Franciscan should be familiar with her life and her writings, which “are filled with contemplative awe of her Spouse as she outlines her very practical approaches to prayer, her relentless pursuit of incorporating essential charisms into her “Form of Life” (also referred to as her Rule,) and fraternity among her sisters.”⁵

From the OFS Rule and General Constitutions

- As Jesus was the true worshipper of the Father, so let prayer and contemplation be the soul of all they are and do. Let them participate in the sacramental life of the Church, above all the Eucharist. Let them join in liturgical prayer in one of the forms proposed by the Church.... [*Rule*, 8]
- The brothers and sisters should love meeting God as His children...They should seek to discover the presence of the Father in their own heart, in nature, and in the history of humanity in which His plan of salvation is fulfilled. [*Constitutions*, 12:3]
- ...the brothers and sisters should try to find times of silence and recollection dedicated exclusively to prayer. [*Constitutions*, 14:5]

For reflection and meditation

In her Fourth Letter to St. Agnes, St. Clare refers to “that Mirror, suspended on the wood of the Cross.” During this season of Lent, whom do we see in the Mirror of the poor and crucified Christ? Is it easier to see ourselves or others in the Mirror on Calvary? How can our Lenten practices intensify our gaze into this Mirror?

¹ Raniero Cantalamessa, OFM Cap., “Do You Know the Living Jesus?” *The Word Among Us*, February 2020, 5.

² *Ibid.*, 5-6

³ All quotations from St. Clare’s letters: Regis Armstrong, OFM Cap., *THE LADY Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*. (New York: New City Press, 2006).

⁴ Ilia Delio, OSF, *Franciscan Prayer*. (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2004), 77.

⁵ Francine Gikow, OFS, February 2020. “St. Clare of Assisi: Co-Foundress of the Franciscan Order.”

Image: St. Clare, detail from the Santa Lucia Triptych, Carlo Crivelli, c. 1470s. Public Domain.
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