

## Reflection on the Lesser Feast of St. Clare



You may or may not know that I follow Franciscan spirituality and today is the Lesser Feast of St. Clare of Assisi\*. Clare was a very young woman when she heard St. Francis preach and she was so moved by his life and teaching that she gave up everything to follow Christ with Francis. Having taken her vows of commitment, she and the other women who came to live the life as taught by Francis lived under a very austere rule – one of absolute poverty. Clare was made abbess of this small contemplative community in Assisi, Italy in 1215. Soon many of her followers set up other houses across Europe.

Fast forward over 750 years to 1972 in Stroud, NSW Australia and a small community of sisters were invited to found a “Poor Clares” monastery outside of the remote historic hamlet 200km north of Sydney.

The monastery sits on about 300 acres of bushland – wild and dusty, it’s a rocky outpost way off the beaten track. Local wildlife includes pythons, spiders the size of dinner plates, rather vicious green ant colonies, geckos, monitor lizards, possums and of course the ubiquitous kangaroos to name but a few. Temperatures regularly reach 46c (115f) during the day and rainfall is measured only in millimetres.

When the Poor Clares arrived from the UK at this desolate and deserted place at the invitation of the Bishop of Newcastle, they must have wondered what on earth God was calling them to. It took their life of austerity to a whole new level.

With the help of the local community, they built a monastery out of hand-made mudbricks with a tin roof. It is an extraordinary place and Sister Angela, a renowned sculptress described the building as a work of sculpture: “We built a mudbrick monastery and people come to it and pick up something that is imparted to them from the place ...It’s got nothing to do with bricks and mortar ...it was made from the earth ... this place will live on whatever happens because love formed it”.

It is to this place that I first came back in 2012 on a retreat. I stayed in “The Bean Hut” a tiny hobbit-like cottage in the grounds and shared meals in silence with my female companions.

The chapel is also made of mud brick with a smooth beaten mud floor – we have to take our shoes off to go in there for fear of damaging it. There is an open fireplace (for use in the winter months, obviously!) and moulded into the walls are pieces of coloured old bottle glass that when the sun hits them, cast orange and bright blue lights across the floor. The altar table is a huge polished burr tree stump in the centre of the room, covered in candle wax from all the worship over the years.

It is basic, very very basic. I can still remember my horror when I first arrived. Not at all what I was expecting and I wondered how on earth I would find any rest and respite amidst the dry and dusty heat. And yet, rest and respite is exactly what I did find. In abundance. It was here that I was introduced to the teachings of St. Francis, here that I first discovered the writings of Richard Rohr on the dusty bookshelves of the old library. Here I took my shoes off to pray the Franciscan Divine Offices on the beaten mud floor and rediscovered my innate primal connection to the earth. (Although I soon learned to put my sandals back on again outside after walking barefoot only once from the little bean hut to the main building – those green ants are vicious!)

The fact is, I found what I was looking for without even knowing I was looking for it. Peace and reconnection. I returned many times over the years to stay in that little bean hut – often as a personal retreat with only the geckos as companions.

I found a grounding in the teachings of Francis and Clare. I was able to better understand the simplicity of life when it is stripped back. I was able to speak with God in everything I did and God spoke with me in everything I could see, smell, hear, taste and touch - yes even the giant spider webs held a message of being caught up in the stickiness of life (although I wouldn't recommend the method of finding that out!)

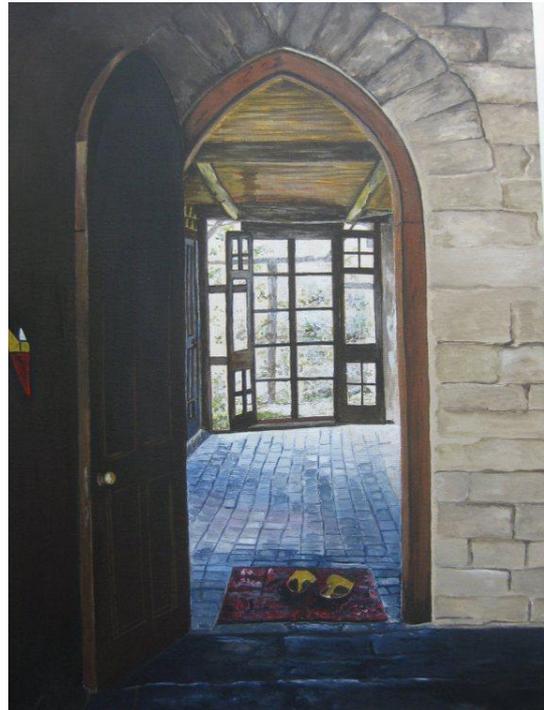
I have only just found these words written by Sister Angela earlier in this reflection but they echo my sentiment exactly – there is something glorious about our connection to God through the earth. We may not all have a mudbrick monastery to retreat to when things get tough and life gets in the way, but try this...

Take off your shoes and socks. Find a patch of cool grass or a corner of earth in the shade in the garden, or sand on the beach and stand on it as you lift your praises to God. Feel the earth beneath your feet and be aware of the sky above you and how you are connected with both. Pray to God with your feet on the ground, lift your arms if you want to and reach up and out to the world around you.

Remember St. Clare, ask her to intercede in prayer for any complicated difficulty you have at the moment. Her example is one of extreme action, and thankfully, we are not all called to that life but she may still give us guidance to see that we can simplify our connection to God. We can choose to cut through all the busyness and bring our prayers and praise to him in gratitude for what we do have.

Below are some more pictures of the Monastery of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Stroud, NSW. It is place I still miss, but which will remain in my heart because part of my own formation took place there.





\*For more information on the life of St. Clare, St. Francis and other saints see the book: Saints on Earth: A Biographical Companion to Common Worship by John Darch and Stuart K. Burns