

The First Letter of St. Clare to St. Agnes of Prague

To the esteemed and most holy virgin, the Lady Agnes, daughter of the most excellent and illustrious King of Bohemia: Clare, an unworthy servant of Jesus Christ and useless handmaid (Lk 17:10) of the Cloistered Ladies of the Monastery of San Damiano, her subject and servant in all things, presents herself totally with a special reverent prayer that she attain the glory of everlasting happiness (Sir 50:5)

As I hear of the fame of your holy conduct and irreproachable life, which is known not only to me but to the entire world as well, I greatly rejoice and exult in the Lord (Hab 3:18). I am not alone in rejoicing at such great news, but I am joined by all who serve and seek to serve Jesus Christ. For though you, more than others, could have enjoyed the magnificence and honor and dignity of the world, and could have been married to the illustrious Caesar with splendor befitting you and His Excellency, you have rejected all these things and have chosen with your whole heart and soul a life of holy poverty and destitution. Thus you took a spouse of more noble lineage, who will keep your virginity ever unspotted and unsullied, the Lord Jesus Christ:

When you have loved Him, you shall be chaste;
when you have touched Him, you shall become pure;
when you have accepted Him, you shall be a virgin.

Whose power is stronger,
Whose generosity is more abundant,
Whose appearance more beautiful,
Whose love more tender,
Whose courtesy more gracious.

In whose embrace you are already caught up;
who has adorned your breast with precious stones
and has placed priceless pearls in your ears
and has surrounded you with sparkling gems
as though blossoms of springtime
and placed on your head a golden crown
as a sign to all of your holiness.

Therefore, most beloved sister, or should I say, Lady worthy of great respect: because you are the spouse and the mother and the sister of my Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor 11:2; Mt 12:50) and have been adorned resplendently with the sign of inviolable virginity and most holy poverty: Be strengthened in the holy service which you have undertaken out of an ardent desire for the Poor Crucified, who for the sake of all of us took upon himself the Passion of the cross (Heb 12:2) and delivered us from the power of the Prince of Darkness (Col 1:13) to whom we were enslaved because of the disobedience of our first parents, and so reconciled us to God the Father (2 Cor 5:18).

O blessed poverty, who bestows eternal riches on those who love and embrace her!

O holy poverty, to those who possess and desire you God promises the kingdom of heaven and offers, indeed, eternal glory and blessed life!

O God-centered poverty, whom the Lord Jesus Christ who ruled and now rules heaven and earth, who spoke and things were made, condescended to embrace before all else!

The foxes have dens, He says, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man, Christ, has nowhere to lay His head, (Mt 8:20) but bowing His head He gave up His spirit. (Jn 19:20) If so great and good a Lord, then, on coming into the Virgin's womb, chose to appear despised, needy and poor in this world, so that people in utter poverty and want and in absolute need of heavenly nourishment might become rich (cf. 2 Cor 8:9) in Him by possessing the kingdom of heaven, then rejoice and be glad! (Hab 3:18). Be filled with a remarkable happiness and a spiritual joy! Contempt of the world has pleased you more than its honors, poverty more than earthly riches, and you have sought to store up greater treasures in heaven rather than on earth, where rust does not consume nor moth destroy, nor thieves break in and steal. (Mt 6:20) Your reward then, is very great in heaven (Mt 5:12)! And you have truly merited to be called a sister, spouse, and mother (2 Cor 11:2; Mt 12:50) of the Son of the Father of the Most High and of the glorious Virgin.

You know, I am sure, that the kingdom of heaven is promised and given by the Lord only to the poor: (cf. Mt 5:3) for he who loves temporal things loses the fruits of love. Such a person cannot serve God and Mammon, for either the

one is loved and the other hated, or the one is served and the other despised.
(Mt 6:24)

You also know that one who is clothed cannot fight with another who is naked, because he is more quickly thrown who gives his adversary a chance to get hold of him; and that one who lives in the glory of earth cannot rule with Christ in heaven.

Again, you know that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven (Mt 19:24)
Therefore you have cast aside your garments, that is, earthly riches, so that you might not be overcome by the one fighting against you, and that you might enter the kingdom of heaven through the straight path and the narrow gate.
(Mt 7:13-14)

What a great laudable exchange:
to leave the things of time for those of eternity,
to choose the things of heaven for the goods of earth,
to receive the hundred-fold in place of one,
and to possess a blessed and eternal life.

Because of this I have resolved, as best I can, to beg your excellency and your holiness by my humble prayers in the mercy of Christ, to be strengthened in His holy service, and to progress from good to better, from virtue to virtue (Ps 83:8), so that He whom you serve with the total desire of your soul may bestow on you the reward for which you long.

I also beg you in the Lord, as much as I can, to include in your holy prayers me, your servant, though unworthy, and the other sisters with me in the monastery, who are all devoted to you, so that by their help we may merit the mercy of Jesus Christ, and together with you may merit to enjoy the everlasting vision.

Farewell in the Lord. And pray for me.