

## Clare's Model of Leadership

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Religious life in the Church often takes its pattern of leadership and government from common practice in society. This pattern of necessary exercise of authority in a given group, whether it be monarchical, dictatorial, or democratic, is, generally speaking, a hierarchical and paternalistic model. It is a "male" design, which has been indiscriminately applied to both men and women religious and accepted most of the time without questioning its relevance, especially for women.

An authoritarian form of leadership and government is a form of power exercised over people. As a consequence, it often keeps them dependent instead of strengthening the power flowing within and from the group. It is a model that does not encourage members to reflect and question, because decisions are made by those who are believed to know what is best for the group. In such a model, leaders may be seen as part of an elite, a privileged class, at a distance from the "ordinary" members of the group. They are perceived as people to be pleased or feared, which may lead to the inhibition of honesty and trust.<sup>1</sup>

Clare of Assisi freely and resolutely opted for a creative and alternative form of leadership, which is reflected in her structures of government. She preferred a much more participative, egalitarian, and empowering framework in organizing her life with the Sisters in the monastery of San Damiano. Clare was an innovator, creating a new form of religious life, not only *for*, but also more especially *with* her sisters. All of them, inspired by Clare's vision, took an active part in creating the life they shared.

Franciscan women today are rediscovering Clare as a source of inspiration for their own attempt to formulate new avenues for the exercise of leadership in religious life. I must say that at first, I didn't feel comfortable turning to Clare as a model. After all, we are followers of Francis rather than Clare. It seemed to me, however, that both Francis and Clare should be considered founders of the Franciscan movement. Clare considered herself a follower of Francis, "his little plant." Some call her "the first Franciscan woman." Never-

theless, I still felt reluctant to look at her as our potential model. In addition, I wondered how the life she experienced in an enclosed monastery of about fifty sisters could inspire an apostolic institute of over four hundred members. So I chose to embark upon this journey, to find elements of her form of leadership and way of governance that might enlighten all of us on our journey.

In our institute, there has been a clearly expressed desire for a renewed model of leadership, a new form of governance, and new structures of government. The 1995 Chapter Statement called for a restructuring in order to meet the challenges involved in reclaiming the missionary dimension of our charism and to be prepared to make the necessary and courageous choices involved. The statement asked for a review of the present government structures in order to move towards restructuring the Institute in a way that is more faithful to living our charism and mission. The Statement also called us to raise our consciousness and understanding of our particular style of servant leadership, our particular style of shared responsibility, and the role of the local minister in the context of shared responsibility.

Restructuring means to look at the structures in the light of the principles underlying them and see if 1) the structures are life-giving, embodying those principles; 2) the structures serve our needs for the community and for the mission; and 3) our principles are Gospel based and Franciscan, as exemplified in Clare. If our structures and principles do not meet these standards, we should consider changing them. Steps have already been taken in this direction, but much is still to be done. The practicalities of the new vision are still to be born, and giving birth is always a painful experience.

We chose Clare of Assisi as our focal point of reference, because she embodies the Franciscan principles of leadership and governance in a feminine way. Clare was a creative leader. Creative leadership "points a finger at the future rather than shakes a finger at the past."<sup>2</sup> The creative leader is responsible for creating and maintaining an atmosphere in which each sister can realize her potential to the fullness. To follow the logical consequences of creativity and intuition would enable us to develop a feminine model of leadership. Clare developed this model in her way of relating with others in the monastery as a servant, a sister, and a mother. In this paper, Clare's concept of authority will be considered, as well as her leadership and way of governance. I hope to offer out of these considerations some guidelines and suggestions for the future in our pursuit of a feminine Franciscan model of leadership and government.

### Clare's Concept of Authority

Our way of governance and leadership needs to be one with our charism as Franciscan women. The basic Franciscan characteristic of this charism is a life according to the form of the holy Gospel. This element is present at the

beginning of all four Franciscan Rules: of the Friars Minor (Rule of 1223), of the Poor Ladies (Rule of Clare 1253), of the Secular Franciscan Order (1978) and of the Third Order Regular (1982). All specify that our rule and/or form of life is this: to observe the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

This Gospel life originates from one's own personal *experience of God*; it flows from a continuous *contemplation* of Jesus Christ; it is expressed in a life of *penance*, which means ongoing conversion; and it aims towards a loving and transforming *union* in and with God. It is a life of *love*—love of God, of Jesus, of the brothers and sisters, and of all creation. It is a life that is highly relational: one cannot be a Franciscan if he or she is not part of some sort of intimate and often quite complex network of relationships. "Loving one another is the heart of the gospel project as Francis and Clare understood it."<sup>33</sup>

As we are searching for our feminine Franciscan way of governance, there are some elements in Clare which can inform our search: a) authority rooted in love of Christ; b) balance between strength and tenderness; c) exemplarism as an expression of authority; d) three feminine images of authority.

### An Authority Rooted in Love of Christ

"The form of life of the Order of the Poor Sisters that Blessed Francis established is this: to observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, by living in obedience, without anything of one's own, and in chastity" (RCl 1: 1-2). Clare had one single motivation for her life: to observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. From the day she was received by Francis at the Portinocola in 1212 to the day of her death at San Damiano in 1253, that was her *leitmotif*; her dynamism, her determination from which no one, even a pope, would ever be able to distract her. "Strong and passionate love of Christ animated her entire being. This profound and fundamental love of Christ to the whole of Clare's life."<sup>34</sup> This focus is the source of her authority, an inner power that has no need of any external use of force to lead others. Having Christ as her own focus, Clare followed his example, and like him became other-centered rather than self-centered. Relationship was so important for Clare that it made her reluctant to give commands to her sisters—she would rather do something herself than command another to do it (Proc 1:10).

Clare's loving relationship with Christ is best expressed in her Letters to Agnes of Prague. Although the entire passages should be taken into consideration, the following excerpts illustrate this love:

You took a spouse of a more noble lineage, the Lord Jesus Christ. In *Those embrace* You are already caught up (1LAg 7:10).

As a poor virgin, *embrace the poor Christ*. Look upon Him . . . , and follow Him, who became the lowest of men, despised, struck, amid the sufferings of the Cross. . . (2LAg 18-20).

So that you too may feel what His friends feel as they taste the hidden sweetness that God Himself has reserved from the beginning for those who *love Him*. And, after all . . . have been completely sent away, *you may totally love Him* Who gave Himself totally for your love. . . (3LAg 14-15).

Happy, indeed, is she to whom it is given to share in this sacred banquet so that she might cling with all her heart to Him. . . . As you further contemplate His ineffable delights, eternal riches and honors, and sigh for them in the great desire and love of your heart, may you cry out: Draw me after you, we will run in the fragrance of your perfumes, O heavenly Spouse! I will run and not tire, until You bring me into the wine-cellar, until Your left hand is under my head and Your right hand will embrace me happily, and You will kiss me with the happiest kiss of Your mouth (4LAg 9:30-32).

"Embrace the poor Christ and love Him totally" sums up Clare's lifelong motivation. It was a fire consuming her. She was "burning with love of God" (Proc 11:5), and she first taught her sisters "to love God above all else and always have the Lord's passion in their memory" (Proc 11:2). The heart of Clare's life is this loving embrace of the poor and suffering Christ. She says to Agnes in her third Letter: if you are to be united to Christ, this is the pathway, going deeper and deeper into woundedness, staying at the foot of the cross like another Mary and sharing in the fruit of salvation. "All her powers of affection were absorbed in this love. She loved Christ with her whole heart. It is this integration of her affectivity that made her so ardent in serving and imitating her Beloved. This passion entirely devoured her."<sup>35</sup> This passion drew sisters after her, and they were enabled to obey out of that same love. "Moved by her [the abbess's] example, the sisters may obey her more out of love than out of fear" (RCl 4: 9).

### A Balanced Authority: Tenderness and Strength

Jean-Francois Godet gives us an excellent insight into the balance between tenderness and strength. He demonstrates how any human being is intrinsically both male and female in the image of God, according to Genesis 1:27, and that such a reality God sees as VERY good. Therefore, says Godet,

femininity is not a monopoly of women, nor is masculinity a monopoly of men. To be truly and fully human is to accept and respect the difference, to communicate with, admire, marvel at, and make an alliance with the masculinity and the femininity within oneself and with others. "Both are necessary for anyone who wishes to be truly human, that is, to be in the image of God."<sup>6</sup>

In their friendship, Francis and Clare were able to reveal to one another the inner complementary of their being. Francis accepted the feminine part of himself, his tenderness, recognizing it in Clare; and Clare acknowledged the masculine element of her nature, her strength, seeing it in Francis. Thus, both of them became fully human in the image of God.

Clare acknowledged her physical weakness and frailty (TestCl 27-29; 3LAG 38-39) and took it into account, going to the proper source of strength, the service of Christ (1LAG 31-32), finding in Him the source of the virtues and of real power and strength. "For Clare, the man Christ, Whom . . . she loved fervently, symbolized and gave strength."<sup>7</sup> Strength finds its source in the core values one embodies and then it impregnates a person's authority and leadership.

In her concept of authority as expressed in her Rule, Clare shows an amazing balance between strength and tenderness. She keeps some elements from the Benedictine Rule, which was imposed on her in 1216; she does not mitigate the essentials. She does not hesitate to change the Rule and adapt it where it seems too harsh for the relational aspect of Franciscan life. For example, look at her prescriptions about silence: "They may speak discreetly at all times for the recreation and service of those who are sick," and "they can communicate always and everywhere whatever is necessary" (RCI 5:3-4). Regarding enclosure, Clare writes: "She may not go outside the monastery except for a useful, reasonable, evident, and approved purpose" (RCI 2:12). There is a balance between acceptance of the norms fixed by the Rule and flexibility in Franciscan freedom. Clare is also able to stand her ground firmly, especially on what is particularly dear to her—holy poverty as the way to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. The chapter dealing with poverty is the kernel of Clare's Rule, and she inserts it at the heart of the text, in Chapter 6. Like a weaver, she places the most beautiful, precious, and unique threads at the center.<sup>8</sup>

### Exemplarism as an Expression of Authority

Clare was a reluctant abbess. "Three years after her conversion, declining the name and office of Abbess, she wished in her humility to be placed under others rather than above them and, among the servants of Christ, to serve more willingly than to be served" (CL 12; see also Proc 3:9). When she commanded, she did so with great fear and humility, wishing to do herself what she had commanded to others (Proc 1:10). She only accepted the direction and

government of the sisters at the prayers and insistence of St. Francis (Proc 1:6). But Clare was careful to insert in her Rule that the Abbess should live in equality with her sisters, preserving the common life in everything (RCI 4:13).

Her means of authority was to be the servant of all the sisters (cf. RCI 10:5; TestCl 65-66). Her principle of authority was to be an example for others to follow (cf. RCI 4:9; CL 12). Her model was Jesus, the Servant, washing the feet of his disciples (Jn. 13:1-15), who said: "The one who rules should be like the one who serves. I am among you as one who serves (Lk. 22: 26-27). . . . Whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mk. 10:44-45).

Clare strove to give an example by going first, confessing her faults at the weekly chapter (cf. RCI 4:15-16), washing the feet of her sisters (Proc 1:12; 2:1-3; 3:9; 6:7; 7:5; 10:6), and placing herself in front of her sisters before the Saracens, ready to lay down her life as their ransom in imitation of Jesus (CL 21; Proc 3:18; 4:14; other witnesses also relate this event.) "This is a summarizing image of Clare the leader—in front, yes, but for the sake of serving, giving life, to those who were her sisters."<sup>9</sup>

### Three Feminine Images of Authority

Clare exercised authority as a *servant*, she remained a *sister*, and she cared for her sisters as a *mother*.<sup>10</sup> It is interesting that all these feminine images of authority found in Clare have to do with *relationships*. It is also noticeable that they are Franciscan images, having an echo in Francis's own writings and life.

#### The Servant

Clare rarely called herself "Abbess." The term she prefers is the Latin word *ancilla* (cf. RCI 1:3; 6; 10: 4), an affectionate term used for the beloved servant of a master, one in a close relationship with the master. Rooted in contemplation of Christ, Clare gazed upon Jesus as Servant and gave heed to his teachings on servanthood. It is noteworthy that all these teachings are related to the Passion, and this is not without influence in the form of life Clare chose as *the way to follow Christ*.

When she was asked to assume the role of Abbess of San Damiano in 1216, Clare found in the image of the Suffering Servant the way God chose to display his power (cf. the Songs of the Servant in Is. 42:1-9; 49:1-7; 50:4-11 and Ph. 2:5-8). Clare saw herself as serving the leadership in the sisters. Bearing in mind Jesus in his Passion, Clare put on the attitudes of the obedient Servant, listening to the call of the Father in the depths of her being, remaining docile to the Spirit at work in the community, responding to the needs of the sisters.<sup>11</sup>

Reluctant in becoming Abbess, Clare never despised the most menial and even risky tasks of service. She was eager to clean the mattresses of the sick sisters (Proc 2:1; 6:7). By so doing she possibly exposed herself to the fleas that transmitted plague, thus performing an act of laying down her life for her sisters, risking her own safety and health, ready to lay down her life as did the Suffering Servant, Jesus.<sup>12</sup> Clare's humble service to her sisters, in its various expressions, flowed from the focus of her life: the imitation of her Beloved, Jesus Christ.

Foot-washing is another service performed by Clare to which many of the witnesses at the Process of Canonization refer. It was a gesture invested with symbolic meaning. For Clare, as for Jesus, it anticipated the ultimate service of the passion and death. It set a pattern of relationships far from a hierarchical one, abolishing ranks and inequality. Foot-washing is a call to a life of service and of self-giving for another's good.<sup>13</sup> This gesture also calls others to do the same; thus the one performing it is an example. Jesus said: "I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you" (Jn. 13: 15). Foot-washing as a model of servanthood calls for many other aspects, as can also be seen in the writings of Francis, especially Adm 13 (patience) and Adm 19 (humility).

#### *The Sister*

Clare fulfilled the duties of the Abbess, but devoted her life to being a Sister. Writing about the Abbess's role in the community, she insists that she be one among equals, a sister rather than a superior. She is compelled to preserve common life with the others (RCl 4:13) and in all decisions to consult the sisters: "I, together with my sisters" (RCl 6:10) or "the Abbess and the sisters" (RCl 1:9; 4:20; 6:11; 9:5) or "the Abbess and the Vicarress" (RCl 5:8), or "the Abbess or her Vicarress with the discreet" (RCl 7:5; 8:11; 9:18). We shall return to this in the next section of this paper when we look at mutual responsibility.

Clare views herself and any succeeding Abbess as on the same level as the rest of the community,<sup>14</sup> and the image of the Sister conveys this horizontal structure of relationships between the members of the community. The image includes ideas of equality, calls forth mutual sharing and support, requires reverence for the other, and finally aims towards harmony and unity.

#### *The Mother*

Instead of calling herself "abbess," Clare uses the term "mother," and it is an image she applies to the Abbess in her Rule. The image is very Franciscan.

It conveys the idea of security, understanding, and loving care that Francis himself expresses in his writings (e.g. the Letter to Brother Leo and the Rule for Hermitages). The image has two main dimensions: motherhood and nurturing care.

Motherhood is a powerful and recurrent theme in early Franciscan thinking about the spiritual life. It refers to the ongoing and painful process of giving life. It is nothing like a "wishy-washy" ideal of mothering, nor does it encourage a leader to become a target for the brothers and sisters' hang-ups about their birth mothers. The birthing Francis has in mind is described in Bonaventure's *Legenda Major*:

While her servant Francis was living in the church of the Virgin Mother of God, he prayed to her who had conceived the Word full of grace and truth, imploring her with continuous sighs to become his advocate. Through the merits of the Mother of Mercy, he conceived and brought to birth the spirit of the truth of the Gospel (LM 3:1).

#### *The Birthing Dimension*

There is indeed a birthing dimension in Franciscan spirituality. In our tradition, bringing to birth is a process of giving life to the Gospel and thus to Jesus who is the Word incarnate expressed in the text of the Gospel. Franciscans, like Mary, are to bear this Word in their flesh, to embody it, and to bring it forth to the world, to bring it to life. They are to do this in themselves and to encourage it in others: "We are mothers, when we carry Him in our heart and body through divine love and a pure and sincere conscience and when we give birth to him through His holy manner of working, which should shine before others as an *example*" (1EpFid 1:10). This "Holy manner of working shining as an example" is the life of the Gospel, the evangelical way of life professed by the Franciscans of all branches. Its principle is the Holy Spirit, the One who came upon Mary, so that she conceived the Word from her own flesh (Lk. 1:35), and the One whom all the brothers and sisters should desire above all things (cf. RegB 10:8; RCl 10:9; Rule of TOR 32). Its Way is the imitation of Christ, especially through his Passion, for the Crucified is the only way to enter into life, as Bonaventure says at the beginning of The Tree of Life:

The true worshiper of God and disciple of Christ, who desires to conform perfectly to the Savior of all men crucified for him, should, above all, strive with an earnest endeavor of soul to carry about continually, both in his soul and in his flesh, the cross of Christ (Prologue 1).

## Nurturing Care

The other aspect of the image of the mother is that of nurturing care. We find it echoed in both Francis and Clare, the latter taking the words from the former: "If a mother has such care and love for her [child] born according to the flesh, should not someone love and care for his brother [or sister] according to the Spirit even more diligently [or lovingly]?" (Cf. RegB 6:7; RCI 8:16). We see again in this passage the role of the Spirit as the One through whom someone is born. Nurturing care has the same root as spiritual motherhood—it is a way of being one with Jesus Christ, the firstborn of the Spirit.

For Godet, femininity is chiefly characterized by nurturing and tender care. To care, to nurture, to make life grow is to be fully human in the image and likeness of God, and this again is for all human beings, men and women. Godet presents three aspects in which Clare's femininity is fully developed: nurturing the body, nurturing the heart, and nurturing the spirit. In nurturing the body, Clare had a maternal and loving concern for the welfare and needs of her sisters (RCI 2:15-16, 22; 8:9-16; TestCl 63-64); in nurturing the heart, she wanted the Abbess to be a haven for the sisters, compassionate, welcoming, and accessible to all (RCI 4:11-12; TestCl 65-66; Proc 3:3, 7; 6:2, 4; 8:3; 10:5); in nurturing the spirit, Clare was a skilled teacher (Proc 11:2; 14:9; 18:5), inspiring, counseling, and conversing with the sisters, correcting them with humility and love when necessary (RCI 10:1).

Clare, in seeing herself as "the little plant" of Francis, acknowledges in him the nurturing care which is so characteristic of a mother, for if she is his little plant, then he is the gardener, an image which evokes the patient and careful attention of a nurturing person.<sup>15</sup> In the Form of Life he gave to the first Poor Ladies, Francis resolved and promised for himself and for his brothers to have that same loving care and special solicitude for them as he had for his brethren. There are, therefore, signs of a nurturing relationship between Francis and Clare, a relationship with a mutual component. Francis had meetings with Clare to help her find her way according to the insight they both shared about Gospel life. He received her at the Portiuncola and made her fully a member of the young Franciscan movement, eventually establishing her in San Damiano. Clare also helped Francis find his way when he was confused about the orientation of his life, and she most certainly cared for him whenever he stayed at San Damiano, especially during the years of turmoil surrounding the stigmata.

In addition to what she says in her Rule, Clare describes in her Testament what she envisions as the nurturing care of the Abbess—kindness and compassion, offering a shelter and bringing consolation to her sisters (TestCl 4-9). She is a caring person, concerned, discreet, kind, familiar, friendly, never cold

or unapproachable, providing for the needs of each (TestCl 64), especially concerned for the sick (RCI 8:12-16) and the afflicted (RCI 4:11-12), offering them guidance, sympathy, and support.<sup>16</sup>

The words spoken by Clare on her death bed show us the source of her motherly love for her sisters: "Go calmly in peace, for you will have a good escort, because He Who created you has sent you the Holy Spirit and has always guarded you as a mother does her child who loves her" (Proc 3:20). It is in the image of God caring for us as a mother that Clare found the source for her own maternal attitudes towards her sisters.<sup>17</sup>

These three feminine images color Clare's concept of authority. They say something about why she did not find it easy to issue orders, why she assigned tasks with shyness and humility, why she reserved the lowliest and most unpleasant tasks for herself, why she rarely gave orders in obedience. She placed humility above obedience,<sup>18</sup> because that is how she found her way to follow in the footsteps of Christ and imitate Him.

## Clare's Leadership—Concept of Governance

What I have said about Clare's concept of authority lays the foundation for her leadership and concept of governance. Her unswerving love of God and her unwavering adherence to God's will led her to follow in the footsteps of Our Lord Jesus Christ through example, especially conforming herself to the Suffering Servant. Imitating his humility, she strove to bring him to birth in herself and in others. As a sister among equals, she guided them with strength and tenderness, a fully human being in the image of God. Two aspects of her leadership derive from these characteristics: a) fostering unity in reverence for each sister and in personal responsibility; b) mutual responsibility among mature women.

## Fostering Unity

"Let the sisters be always eager to preserve among themselves the unity of mutual love which is the bond of perfection" (RCI 10:7; cf. Jn. 17:22-23). Unity is the evangelical foundation of the community of sisters, because the same essential love reigned in the heart of each one. The basis, the root of their common ideal, was an "absolute adherence to Jesus Christ and a readiness to endure anything to follow him."<sup>19</sup> Each sister knew *why* and *for whom* she was living—the Lord Jesus Christ. This was their bond of unity, which Clare herself lived first and taught them.

Each sister could look at the heart of the other and find there the same profound and dedicated love for Christ that she herself experienced. Because of this, there had to be a deep reverence for the mystery of each other, as each

one was personally called to follow in the footsteps of Our Lord Jesus Christ in a very personal and unique manner in the midst of the community. In this regard, Clare is definitely speaking to the best in each person.

It is the responsibility of the Abbess to preserve the unity of mutual love and peace (RCI 4:22). This unity in mutual charity is the expression of each sister's union with God. Any sister can claim to be in union with God only insofar as she is acting charitably with her sisters (Jm. 2:14-17; 3:13-16; Jn. 4:20-21). Mutual charity is to love the other as Christ loves her. External deeds are the measure of the love within the heart; however there are some deeds that can destroy charity.<sup>20</sup> Clare warns against the anger and disturbance that one may feel at the sin of a sister (RCI 9:5) and calls for reconciliation among the sisters whenever a word or a gesture causes one to be troubled by another (RCI 9: 6-10).

Clare seems to be well aware of difficulties that, like field mines, endanger common life in the enclosure. She writes her Rule out of a long experience: "I admonish and exhort the sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ to beware of all pride, vainglory, envy, avarice, care and anxiety about this world, detraction and murmuring, dissension and division" (RCI 10:6). All of these situations must have occurred in the monastery of San Damiano for Clare to feel a need to write about them in her Rule, because all her words are weighted when she writes. She is clearly attempting to uproot all sources of discord that cloud the unity of the sisters' life of mutual love.

#### *Mutual Responsibility among Mature Women*

The basis of the common ideal provides the foundation for mutuality in the community. It is because each sister is totally dedicated to the love of Christ as the very core dimension of her life that all of them and together are responsible for the welfare of the group. Each sister stands before God, having surrendered her own will and freedom for the love of God (RCI 10:2). In their obedience the sisters seek to fulfill God's will.

Each sister is bound to the others in affection and tenderness (RCI 8:16). Clare provides many openings for respect, trust, openness, creating a climate of mutual listening through dialogue, calling for an obedience that is far from passive. The sisters are to inquire about the needs of the sick (RCI 8:14), share confidently their needs with one another (RCI 8:15), and meet together weekly (RCI 4:15-18) to make any decisions that pertain to the good of their common commitment to the Gospel form of life, which they have professed and which they daily live.

Clare expresses mutual and caring solicitude by using a metaphor in her Testament—the sisters are like mirrors for one another, revealing in reciprocity the image to which the Lord has called them to be in fullness of life.

For the Lord Himself has placed us not only as a form for others in being an example and mirror, but even for our sisters whom the Lord has called to our way of life as well, that they in turn might be a mirror and example to those living in the world. Since the Lord has called us to such great things that *those who are to be a mirror and example to others may be reflected in us*, we are greatly bound to bless and praise God and be all the more strengthened to do good in the Lord (TestCl 19-22).

The weekly chapter emphasizes the shared responsibility in the community's life for growth and development. The Abbess consults with all her sisters concerning whatever pertains to the welfare and good of the monastery, for the Lord frequently reveals what is best to the least among them (RCI 4: 17-18). It is the sisters' shared responsibility to elect an Abbess. It is their responsibility, as well, to replace an Abbess who is not competent for their service and common welfare or any other official in the community if it seems necessary (RCI 4:7,24). All who hold offices in the monastery are chosen by the common consent of all the sisters to preserve the unity of mutual love and peace (RCI 4: 22). The Abbess is helped in her office by eight sisters elected by all (RCI 4:23).

Decision-making in collegiality and consultation requires a good deal of discernment and maturity. Each sister's intelligence, will, and heart have a part in the process of reflection, critical judgment, decision-making, and common action.<sup>21</sup> The Rule of Clare provides inner space for judgment and discernment. It requires trust in the individual good will and prudence of the sisters. Clare acts as a facilitator and active listener in the midst of her sisters. She believes that the Spirit may speak through any of the sisters, even the least (RCI 4:18). Listening to the Spirit speaking to each one and to the group is a process that needs time. It is counter-cultural in our society of immediacy. Our experience of communal decision-making shows that it is a process in which we often have disagreements. To listen to the Spirit is to allow disagreements to be expressed and heard: the Spirit may be saying something to us in the very midst of our disagreements. We must therefore pay attention to them, continuing to ask ourselves: What is the Spirit trying to say to us now?

#### **Some Elements of Feminine Franciscan Governance**

Clare's goal was to achieve an evangelical fraternity like that of the friars,<sup>22</sup> but in a totally different context—that of an enclosed group comprised of many women (sometimes as many as fifty). Her principles need to be fleshed in our Third Order Regular way of life. From this study of Clare's authority and leadership, we are now able to draw some principles for a feminine Franciscan leadership.

1. Feminine Franciscan leadership resides in each sister's *personal inner authority rooted in deep love of Christ*. This love is fed and nourished by prayer and *contemplation of the Suffering Servant as our model*. Such inner authority calls for *discernment*, listening to the Spirit first in oneself and then in the group. In turn, discernment brings forth *collegiality* in decision-making, each one being involved in an ongoing process of personal and communal discernment through constant attentiveness, openness, and readiness before the Spirit.

2. *Relational structures of equality* among sisters freed from a dominant exercise of power are the direct consequence of each sister's rootedness in a deep love of Christ. Clare instructed her sisters constantly to remember, embrace, and love totally the poor Christ, especially in his Passion. She chose His way of exercising authority through *servanthood*. With this in mind, we ask ourselves if the Suffering Servant is really the center of our lives and if we are ready to serve and lay down our life for any sister.

3. Looking at Clare, each one of us, in developing our personal inner authority, is also called to become fully human, a *balanced* person, acknowledging our strengths and weaknesses, mutually helping one another to grow in awareness towards *wholeness*. Like Clare, we are invited to use our feminine and masculine components, the strength and the tenderness in us, holding firm to what is essential to our Franciscan way of life and showing motherly care and solicitude for our sisters.

4. Inner authority is the source of each sister's leadership. One way of expressing this reality is *exemplarism*, taking again Christ the Servant as the model, following his command: As I have done for you, so shall you do for others. Exemplarism, rooted in Jesus' teaching on *servanthood*, sets an *egalitarian pattern of relationships* as the foundation for renewed structures of government and way of governance. Setting a way of life to follow, exemplarism calls every sister to become a mirror for others, revealing herself as who she is called to be, bringing to light her potential.

5. The leadership in each sister is also a capacity to *give birth to the Word*, in herself and in others, through the operation of the Holy Spirit. Hence the importance Clare puts on each sister's capacity for *discernment* and responsibility to strive to *listen to the Spirit*. Who can reveal to the least what is best for the community. It is only in listening to the Spirit that Christ can be formed in our hearts and brought to birth in our own lives first and then in the lives of others. And this *birthing process*, this spiritual *motherhood*, calls for *nurturing care*, as expressed repeatedly by Clare in *mutual solicitude* for one another and in *collegial decision-making* for the welfare of all in the monastery.

6. In Clare's vision, each sister's love of God is the root of *unity* to be fostered among the sisters, in deep *reverence* for the mystery of each one's personal call to union with God. Anything that impedes unity among the sisters can be a hindrance to union with God. Therefore it must be uprooted. In love of God, each sister becomes accountable before the others, all being *bound* to one another in *mutual love, life-giving care*, and *shared responsibility*.

## Conclusion

At the beginning of this reflection, I recalled the two-fold desire for new structures of government and a renewed concept of governance. We want these to be Franciscan and feminine, knowing that we must remain focused on new life and new ways of living the charism *for the sake of mission*. Clare teaches us to begin with a personal, essential, and fundamental element—our rootedness in love of God. Each sister's personal experience of God, each sister's personal call to union with God is the source of her inner authority and leadership. This gives her a profound freedom in which all are bound in mutuality for the sake of God's love.

Each sister's inner authority and leadership constitutes the starting point from which a renewed form of leadership and new structures of government will spring. Instead of falling into the trap of beginning at the top with new structures, we need a process that starts at the bottom with an examination of the underlying principles of our current structures—confronting them with the six elements I have drawn from Clare.

Although the vision presented here is a difficult and challenging ideal to attain, Clare's steadfastness inspires us not to give up. Just as her Rule was approved as she lay on her deathbed, so our ideal might not be attained until the end of our lives. May we take to heart these words of Francis on his death bed: "Let us begin, brothers, to serve the Lord God, for up to now we have made little or no progress" (1Cel 103).

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Madge Karecki, SSIJTOSE, "Clare of Assisi: An Enabling Leader," *The Cord*, 37.7 (1987): 197-198.

<sup>2</sup>Mary Francis, FCC, "Creative Spiritual Leadership," *Communication and Communication*, No. 14, (Roswell, 1992), 8.

<sup>3</sup>Dorothy McCormack, OSF, "The Essential Elements of the Evangelical Life of Franciscans," *The Cord*, 38.8 (1988): 243.

<sup>4</sup>René-Charles Dhont, *Clare Among Her Sisters* (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 1987), 24.

<sup>5</sup>Dhont, 29.

