

AUGUST XII.

## ST. CLARE, V. A.

[From her authentic life, written soon after her death, by order of Pope Alexander IV., who had pronounced her funeral panegyric whilst Cardinal of Ostia, and who canonized her two years after. See also the annals of the Franciscan Order, compiled by the learned F. Luke Wading; her life published in English; F. Sbarala, &c.]

A.D. 1253.

ST. CLARE was daughter to Phavorino Sciffo, a noble knight who had distinguished himself in the wars, and his virtuous spouse called Hortulana. These illustrious personages, who held the first rank at Assisium for their birth and riches, were still more eminent for their extraordinary piety. They had three daughters, Clare, Agnes, and Beatrice. St. Clare was born in 1193, at Assisium, a city in Italy, built on a stony mountain called Assi; from her infancy she was extremely charitable and devout. It was her custom to count her task of Paters and Aves by a certain number of little stones in her lap, in imitation of some ancient anchorets in the East. Her parents began to talk to her very early of marriage, which gave her great affliction; for it was her most ardent desire to have no other spouse but Jesus Christ. Hearing the great reputation of St. Francis, who set an example of perfection to the whole city, she found means to be conducted to him by a pious matron, and begged his instruction and advice. He spoke to her on the contempt of the world, the shortness of life, and the love of God and heavenly things in such a manner as warmed her tender breast; and, upon the spot, she formed a resolution of renouncing the world. St. Francis appointed Palm Sunday for the day on which she should come to him. On that day Clare, dressed in her most sumptuous apparel, went with her mother and family to the divine office; but when all the rest went up to the altar to receive a palm-branch, bashfulness and modesty kept her in her place; which the bishop seeing, he went from the altar down to her and gave her the palm.

She attended the procession; but the evening following it, being the 18th of March, 1212, she made her escape from home, accompanied with another devout young woman, and went a mile out of the town to the Portiuncula, where St. Francis lived with his little community. He and his religious brethren met her at the door of their church of our Lady with lighted tapers in their hands, singing the hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus*. Before the altar of the Blessed Virgin she put off her fine clothes, and St. Francis cut off her hair, and gave her his penitential habit, which was no other than a piece of sackcloth, tied about her with a cord. The holy father not having yet any nunnery of his own, placed her for the present in the Benedictin nunnery of St. Paul, where she was affectionately received, being then eighteen years of age. The Poor Clares date from this epoch the foundation of their Order.

No sooner was this action of the holy virgin made public, but the world conspired unanimously to condemn it, and her friends and relations came in a body to draw her out of her retreat. Clara resisted their violence, and held the altar so fast as to pull the holy cloths half off it when they endeavoured to drag her away; and, uncovering her head to show her hair cut, she said that Christ had called her to his service, and that she would have no other spouse of her soul; and that the more they should continue to persecute her, the more God would strengthen her to resist and overcome them. They reproached her that by embracing so poor and mean a life she disgraced her family; but she bore their insults, and God triumphed in her. St. Francis soon after removed her to another nunnery, that of St. Angelo of Panso, near Assisium, which was also of St. Bennet's Order. There her sister Agnes joined her in her undertaking; which drew on them both a fresh persecution, and twelve men abused Agnes both with

words and blows, and dragged her on the ground to the door, whilst she cried out, "Help me, sister; permit me not to be separated from our Lord Jesus Christ, and your loving company." Her constancy proved at last victorious, and St. Francis gave her also the habit, though she was only fourteen years of age. He placed them in a new mean house, contiguous to the Church of St. Damian, situated on the skirts of the city Assisium, and appointed Clare the superior. She was soon after joined by her mother, Hortulana, and several ladies of her kindred, and others, to the number of sixteen, among whom three were of the illustrious family of the Ubal dini, in Florence. Many noble princesses held for truer greatness the sackcloth and poverty of St. Clare than the estates, delights, and riches which they possessed, seeing they left them all to become humble disciples of so holy and admirable a mistress. St. Clare founded, within a few years, monasteries at Perugia, Arezzo, Padua, that of SS. Cosmas and Damian in Rome; at Venice, Mantua, Bologna, Spoleto, Milan, Sienna, Pisa, &c., also at many principal towns in Germany. Agnes, daughter to the King of Bohemia, founded a nunnery of her Order in Prague, in which herself took the habit.

St. Clare and her community practised austerities which till then had scarce ever been known among the tender sex. They wore neither stockings, shoes, sandals, nor any other covering on their feet; they lay on the ground, observed a perpetual abstinence, and never spoke but when they were obliged to it by the indispensable duties of necessity and charity. The foundress, in her rule, extremely recommends this holy silence as the means to retrench innumerable sins of the tongue, and to preserve the mind always recollected in God, and free from the dissipation of the world, which without this guard penetrates the walls of cloisters. Not content with the four Lents, and the other general mortifications of her rule, she always wore

next her skin a rough shift of horsehair or of hogs' bristles cut short; she fasted church vigils and all Lent on bread and water; and from the 11th of November to Christmas-day, and during these times, on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, ate nothing at all. She sometimes strewed the ground on which she lay with twigs, having a block for her bolster. Her disciplines, watchings, and other austerities were incredible, especially in a person of so tender a constitution. Being reduced to great weakness and to a very sickly state of health, St. Francis and the Bishop of Assisium obliged her to lie upon a little chaff, and never pass one day without taking at least some bread for nourishment. Under her greatest corporal austerities her countenance was always mild and cheerful, demonstrating that true love makes penance sweet and easy. Her esteem of holy poverty was most admirable. She looked upon it as the retrenchment of the most dangerous objects of the passions and self-love, and as the great school of patience and mortification, by the perpetual inconveniences and sufferings which it lays persons under, and which the spirit of Christ crucified teaches us to bear with patience and joy. It carries along with it the perfect disengagement of the heart from the world, in which the essence of true devotion consists. The saint considered in what degree Christ, having for our sakes relinquished the riches of his glory, practised holy poverty in his birth, without house or other temporal conveniency; and, during his holy ministry, without a place to lay his head in, and living on voluntary contributions; but, above all, his poverty, nakedness, and humiliation on the cross, and at his sacred death, were deeply imprinted on her mind, and she ardently sought to bear for his sake some resemblance of that state which he had assumed for us to apply a proper remedy to our spiritual wounds, and heal the corruption of our nature.

St. Francis instituted that his Order

should never possess any rents even in common, subsisting on daily contributions. St. Clare possessed this spirit in such perfection, that when her large fortune fell to her, by the death of her father, after her profession, she gave the whole to the poor, without reserving one single farthing for the monastery. Pope Gregory IX. desired to mitigate this part of her rule, and offered to settle a yearly revenue on her monastery of St. Damian's; but she, in the most pressing manner, persuaded him by many reasons, in which her love of evangelical poverty made her eloquent, to leave her Order in its first rigorous establishment. Whilst others asked riches, Clare presented again her most humble request to Pope Innocent IV. that he would confirm to her Order the singular privilege of holy poverty, which he did, in 1251, by a bull written with his own hand, which he watered at the same time with tears of devotion: So dear was poverty to St. Clare, chiefly for her great love of humility. Though superior, she would never allow herself any privilege or distinction. It was her highest ambition to be the servant of servants, always beneath all, washing the feet of the lay-sisters, and kissing them when they returned from begging, serving at table, attending the sick, and removing the most loathsome filth. When she prayed for the sick, she sent them to her other sisters, that their miraculous recovery might not be imputed to her prayers or merits. She was so true a daughter of obedience, that she had always as it were, wings to fly wherever St. Francis directed her, and was always ready to execute any thing, or to put her shoulders under any burden that was enjoined her; she was so crucified to her own will, as to seem entirely divested of it. This she expressed to her holy father as follows:—"Dispose of me as you please; I am yours by having consecrated my will to God. It is no longer my own."

Prayer was her spiritual comfort and strength, and she seemed scarce ever to interrupt that holy exercise. She often prostrated herself on the ground, kissed it, and watered it with many tears. Whilst her sisters took their rest, she watched long in prayer, and was always the first that rose, rung the bell in the choir, and lighted the candles. She came from prayer with her face so bright and inflamed (like that of Moses descending from conversing with God), that it often dazzled the eyes of those that beheld her; and every one perceived, by her words, that she came from her devotions; for she spoke with such a spirit and fervour as enkindled a flame in all who did but hear her voice, and diffused into their souls a great esteem of heavenly things. She communicated very often, and had a wonderful devotion towards the blessed Sacrament. Even when she was sick in bed, she spun with her own hands fine linen for corporals, and for the service of the altar, which she distributed through all the churches of Assisium. In prayer she was often so absorbed in divine love as to forget herself and her corporal necessities. She, on many occasions, experienced the all-powerful force and efficacy of her holy prayer. A remarkable instance is mentioned in her life. The impious Emperor Frederic II. cruelly ravaged the Valley of Spolletto, because it was the patrimony of the holy see. He had in his army many Saracens and other barbarous infidels, and left in that country a colony of twenty thousand of these enemies of the church in a place still called Noura des Moros. These banditti came once in a great body to plunder Assisium, and as St. Damian's convent stood without the walls, they first assaulted it. Whilst they were busy in scaling the walls, St. Clare, though very sick, caused herself to be carried and seated at the gate of the monastery, and the blessed Sacrament to be placed there in a pix in the very sight of the enemies,

and, prostrating herself before it, prayed with many tears, saying to her beloved spouse, "Is it possible, my God, that thou shouldst have here assembled these thy servants, and nurtured them up in thy holy love, that they should now fall into the power of these infidel Moors! Preserve them, O my God, and me in their holy company." At the end of her prayer, she seemed to hear a sweet voice, which said, "I will always protect you." A sudden terror, at the same time, seized the assailants, and they all fled with such precipitation, that several were hurt without being wounded by any enemy. Another time, Vitalis Aversa, a great general of the same emperor, a cruel and proud man, laid siege to Assisium for many days. St. Clare said to her nuns, that they who had received corporal necessities from that city, owed to it all assistance in their power in its extreme necessity. She, therefore, bid them cover their heads with ashes, and in this most suppliant posture beg of Christ the deliverance of the town. They continued pressing their request with many tears a whole day and night, till powerful succours arriving, the besiegers silently raised the siege, and retired without noise, and their general was soon after slain.

St. Francis was affected with the most singular and tender devotion towards the mysteries of Christ's nativity and sacred passion. He used to assemble incredible numbers of the people to pass the whole Christmas night in the church in fervent prayer; and, at midnight, once preached with such fervour and tenderness, that he was not able to pronounce the name Jesus, but called him the little child of Bethlehem; and, in repeating these words, always melted away with tender love. St. Clare inherited this same devotion and tenderness to this holy mystery, and received many special favours from God in her prayers on that festival. As to the passion of Christ, St. Francis called it his perpetual book, and said he never desired

to open any other but the history of it in the gospels, though he were to live to the world's end. The like were the sentiments of St. Clare towards it; nor could she call to mind this adorable mystery without streams of tears, and the warmest emotions of tender love. In sickness particularly it was her constant entertainment. She was afflicted with continual diseases and pains for eight-and-twenty years, yet was always joyful, allowing herself no other indulgence than a little straw to lie on. Reginald, Cardinal of Ostia, afterwards Pope Alexander IV., both visited her and wrote to her in the most humble manner. Pope Innocent IV. paid her a visit a little before her death, going from Perugia to Assisium on purpose, and conferring with her a long time on spiritual matters with wonderful comfort.

St. Clare bore her sickness and great pains without so much as speaking of them, and when Brother Reginald exhorted her to patience, she said, "How much am I obliged to my sweet Redeemer! for since, by means of his servant Francis, I have tasted the bitterness of his holy passion, I have never in my whole life found any pain or sickness that could afflict me. There is nothing insupportable to a heart that loveth God; and to him that loveth not, every thing is insupportable." Agnes, seeing her dear sister and spiritual mother draw near her end, besought her, with great affection and many tears, that she would take her along with her, and not leave her here on earth, seeing they had been such faithful companions, and so united in the same spirit and desire of serving our Lord. The holy virgin comforted her, telling her it was the will of God she should not at present go along with her; but bade her be assured she should shortly come to her, and so it happened. St. Clare, seeing all her spiritual children weep, comforted them, and tenderly exhorted them to be constant lovers and faithful observers of holy poverty, and gave them her blessing, calling

herself the little plant of her holy father St. Francis. The passion of Christ, at her request, was read to her in her agony, and she sweetly expired amidst the prayers and tears of her community, on the 11th of August, 1253, in the forty-second year after her religious profession, and the sixtieth of her age. She was buried on the day following, on which the church keeps her festival. Pope Innocent IV. came again from Perugia, and assisted in person with the sacred college at her funeral. Alexander IV. canonized her at Anagnia, in 1255. Her body was first buried at St. Damian's; but the pope ordered a new monastery to be built for her nuns at the Church of St. George within the walls, which was finished in 1260, when her relics were translated thither with great pomp. A new church was built here afterwards, which bears her name; in which, in 1265, Pope Clement V. consecrated the high altar under her name, and her body lies under it. The body of St. Francis had lain in this Church of St. George four years, when, in 1230, it was removed to that erected in his honour, in which it still remains. Camden remarks that the family name Sinclair among us is derived from St. Clare.

The example of this tender virgin, who renounced all the softness, superfluity, and vanity of her education, and engaged and persevered in a life of so much severity, is a reproach of our sloth and sensuality. Such extraordinary rigours are not required of us; but a constant practice of self-denial is indispensably enjoined us by the sacred rule of the gospel, which we all have most solemnly professed. Our backwardness in complying with this duty is owing to our lukewarmness, which creates in every thing imaginary difficulties, and magnifies shadows. St. Clare, notwithstanding her continual extraordinary austerities, the grievous persecutions she had suffered, and the pains of a sharp and tedious distemper with which she was afflicted, was surprised when she lay on

her death-bed, to hear anyone speak of her patience, saying, that from the time she had first given her heart to God, she had never met with any thing to suffer, or to exercise her patience. This was the effect of her ardent charity. Let none embrace her holy institute without a fervour which inspires a cheerful eagerness to comply, in the most perfect manner, with all its rules and exercises; and without seriously studying to obtain, and daily improve, in their souls, her eminent spirit of poverty, humility, obedience, love of silence, mortification, recollection, prayer, and divine love. In this consists their sanctification; in this they will find all present and future blessings and happiness.

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