# Boston College
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY
## Continuing Education Encore Events

## Transcript of
## "Clare of Assisi: From Historical Figure to Saintly Model"

**presented on October 11, 2017**
**by**
**Catherine M. Mooney**

**Dr. Jane Regan:**

And now, it's my great pleasure to introduce our presenter. My good colleague, Catherine M. Mooney, currently serves as associate professor of Church history here at Boston College in the School of Theology and Ministry. And that's a role that she has had since 2001 beginning with Weston Jesuit School of Theology. She holds the M.T.S. degree from Harvard Divinity School, and a master's degree and a Ph.D. from Yale University in medieval history.

Previously, Professor Mooney served as visiting scholar and coordinator of the Gender Studies graduate program at the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa, and spent many years teaching at Virginia Commonwealth University. She also served as visiting professor of Franciscan Studies for a year at the Franciscan Institute at in St. Bonaventure, New York.

Cathy's written many book chapters and articles and book reviews. She's the editor of a collection of essays which include two of her own, entitled *Gendered Voices, Medieval Saints and their Interpreters.* She's also the author of two books, the biography of *Philippine Duchesne: A Woman with the Poor* and one of the first saints of American frontier, and the newly-published book of tonight's topic, *Clare of Assisi and the 13th Century Church: Religious Women, Rules, and Resistance*.

In addition to lecturing in scholarly and pastoral venues, Dr. Mooney is active in human rights efforts. Since 1990, she has served on the board of the Ignacio Martin-Baro Fund for Mental Health and Human Rights, named after one of the Jesuits who had been killed in El Salvador, murdered in El Salvador in 1989. She regularly circulates news to a list of thousands of followers from the ongoing struggle for justice of the Wichi Amerindians of northern Argentina whom she met when working as a pastoral and human rights advocate during Argentina's military dictatorship and Dirty War.

So obviously, Cathy is a person of wide interests and specialization and committed to the pastoral work of international justice. And so we're pleased to have her on our faculty and happy to be welcome here. Just keep in mind, she's on sabbatical this year and so she's coming to us out of sabbatical, which is even more generous. So let's welcome Cathy.

[APPLAUSE]

**Dr. Catherine Mooney:**

Thank you, Jane, for that very generous introduction. By the way, I left a check in your mailbox.

[LAUGHTER]

It's stunning to consider that the 13th century figure—that moved and it shouldn't have. It's stunning to consider that the 13th century figure Clare of Assisi still draws the attention of people like you all here tonight and also of many scholars. People interested in Franciscan life, in the history of the Church, in the history of religious women, et cetera. As I speak tonight, eight centuries after Clare

was alive, we are in the midst of the most intense and [INAUDIBLE] scholarship about Clare that I think has ever taken place. This Renaissance took off around 1992 and 1993 when the 800-year anniversary of her birth was being celebrated, and it continues unabated today.

In discussing Clare's life tonight in a roughly chronological fashion, I plan to interweave some traditional story lines that have marked the contours of her life with new discoveries and insights, some of which add depth to these traditional depictions and others of which challenge or even upend these earlier understandings. This historical Clare is also fascinating to juxtapose with Saint Clare, the woman who was idealized in text and art after her death.

Now Clare was born in 1193 in the upper section of Assisi where the wealthier families resided. Like many people in the Assisi region, she found the charismatic Francis of Assisi compelling, even captivating.

Let me begin this exploration of Clare with a simple, even trivial sounding question. Did Clare seek Francis out or did Francis seek Clare out? This is one of the many disjunctures we find in literature about Clare. An important legend, or saint's life, that was composed about Clare shortly after her death states that Clare sought Francis out. It wouldn't be surprising. He was becoming rather well-known, she was a young girl still residing at home, and was, well, somewhat known but not so much.

For many years, this legend served as one of the principal sources for our knowledge about Clare. Composed by a Franciscan friar, it exists as one of the principal sources today. It drew many of its facts from the testimony of witnesses who had been interrogated for Clare's canonization shortly after she died.

The canonization process was just becoming formalized a few generations, maybe even just one generation before Clare died. Similar to canonization processes today, it called for the examination of witnesses who knew the candidate so they could consider that in their judgment about sanctity. The witnesses were interrogated, their answers were recorded, they were passed on to prelates in the Roman Curia, today rather sloppily referred to as the Vatican, and then later they were used as notes by anyone who wanted to put together an organized biography about the saints. Often, quite often, these notes were then discarded.

For centuries, it was assumed that “The Acts,” as these notes are known, had suffered a similar fate. Of course, I hasten to point out that scholars weren't looking very hard for these Acts or for many other texts about Clare. She was, to some extent still today is, a moon that reflected the light of the more important and brilliant sun, Francis of Assisi.

It was only in the early 20th century that scholars discovered a copy of The Acts. It included the testimonies of 21 people, including 16 sisters who lived with Clare, some for three or four decades. One of the witnesses was Clare's younger sister, Beatrix, and Beatrix, who you might think knew something about Clare's youth, told the canonization commissioners questioning her that Francis had repeatedly sought Clare out. Because he had heard of her sanctity, he wanted to preach to her and convert her over to his vision of religious life.

Who sought out whom? It's a small point but it illustrates a greater point. The hagiographer—that's the term we use for authors of saints' lives—the hagiographer who wrote Clare's life seems to have intentionally reframed what Beatrix said to preserve Francis's status as the greater saint, the one whom all sought out.

Of course, it's possible he had been persuaded that Beatrix was wrong. But this is what hagiographers do. At the same time, they want to convey what we would call “reliable evidence” about their subject,

they also want to spruce them up. So hagiographers are not beyond embellishing, adapting, or even inventing facts to make their saint look more like a saint. Their principal aim is not to convey historical evidence about their subject, but to convey moral truths that will inspire their listeners and readers.

However it happened, once Clare had indeed been persuaded by Francis's message of living poorly and humbly, the two hatched a plan that she would flee from her family's home one night. The sisters who testified said that Clare met Francis at a little church that he loved and often stayed at, the Porziuncola, a church that still exists today, albeit, it has been encased within a larger church to protect it from the weather.

They reported that Francis then tonsured Clare, cutting her hair in a ritual act that signified her commitment to religious life. The legend author added, probably to fend off accusations of impropriety, that Clare met not only Francis, but also his friars. And you'll note that the previous slide had showed Clare being accompanied by several female and one male guardian, although the earliest sources state that she was accompanied by one companion.

Soon thereafter, Clare took up residence in San Damiano, a little church that Francis had been repairing outside the walled town of Assisi, here pictured in a later and expanded architectural configuration.

The traditional narrative about Clare has it that with that move to San Damiano, Francis, together with Clare, founded the religious order that would become known in her lifetime as the Order of San Damiano, or today, the Order of Saint Clare, also referred to as the Poor Clares.

This well-known fact—notice my air quotes—about the historical Clare, however, has now been seriously challenged by scholars—and I am among them—who are consulting not only The Acts and the legend in Clare's own writings, but also dozens of lesser known texts, especially letters written by various popes and prelates during Clare's lifetime. These texts indicate that Francis and Clare founded the single religious House of San Damiano, rather than an order.

Now, its worth noting that our understanding of a religious order today—that is, a network of religious houses that has a unified juridical structure—was just coming into being a few generations before Clare's life. The large majority of monasteries and other types of religious houses were independent of each other. Even if they followed a similar rule, such as the Rule of Saint Benedict, these rules were liberally adapted to each religious house. And most of these independent houses were under the jurisdiction of their local bishop, apart from any formal connection to other houses.

Now this period was known for its efflorescence of all kinds of religious lifestyles that accommodated clerics, laymen, laywomen, even married and single people. The lifestyles in women's religious houses varied tremendously. Some were strictly cloistered, or enclosed, others were semi-enclosed, and others not enclosed at all, leaving the women to come and go freely to undertake, for instance, acts of charity on behalf of their neighbors.

Women self-identified religiously as nuns, as sisters, as lay penitents, or by a host of other names. So how, then, did the Order of San Damiano begin? Well, around 1218, a papal legate—that is, a papal ambassador—was traveling through Umbria, where Clare lived, and Tuscany. And this legate, who was known as Cardinal Ugo or also known as Ugolino, observed many independent houses of religious women, many living quite poorly, following various rules, some cloistered, some not, some devoted principally to prayer, others mixing a life of prayer with acts of apostolic charity. He wanted to organize them into a single religious order and give them a uniform lifestyle.

Rather than many dozens of houses being under this or that bishop, Cardinal Ugo wanted them all to be directly under the control of the papacy. The pope agreed. Cardinal Ugo then drew up a document legislating how the women were to live. First called a form of life, it was indeed a rule and Ugo himself who would later refer to it as a rule. And thus began the very first religious order of women that was under the direct control of the papacy.

Note, this papal order began about seven years after Clare had taken up residence in San Damiano. It was also not named the Order of San Damiano, but went by several titles, including the Order of Poor Ladies, the Order of Poor Nuns, and especially the Order of Poor Enclosed Nuns.

How then, later, did Clare and her religious house become involved in this order, the Order of Poor Enclosed Nuns? Cardinal Ugo was doing all he could to promote and expand the new women's order and he looked for a way to grow its cache. He also happened to be an admirer and an advocate for Francis of Assisi and his friars.

In 1218, when the women's order was launched, Francis and his friars—which simply means brothers—were not yet a recognized religious order. In fact, Francis initially did not start out to find an order of men, but with men joining him by the hundreds, he was urged to write a rule that would found what would become known later as the Order of Lesser Brothers, the people we identify as Franciscan friars.

Now, Francis was more of a charismatic figure than an institutional legislator. He inspired others with his preaching and his personal example of poverty, but he proved to be a reluctant administrator. The first rule he wrote captures his lyrical passion. It was also meandering. It included exhortatory language more appropriate to a sermon than a rule. It lacked many legislative points expected of a rule. The papacy rejected it. With help from others, including a canon lawyer, Francis wrote a more succinct, administratively precise rule that the papacy approved.

Years later, Cardinal Ugo, who by then had become Pope Gregory IX, said he was involved in this process and that he was the person who got the papacy to approve that second rule. Ugo, now Gregory, would have known, of course, of Francis's foundation of San Damiano and his patronage of Clare. Clare herself was gaining more admirers in Assisi and the surrounding region. Scholars believe that Ugo wanted Clare and San Damiano to become part of the women's papal order to burnish the order's credential. So this is—now I'm back in a period that is still prior to him becoming pope.

Francis's halo cast its light over Clare and Clare's halo, Ugo hoped, would cast its light on the papal order, enticing yet more women's independent houses to join it. When San Damiano became part of the papal order is not entirely certain. But we know that at least by 1221—that is, about 10 years after San Damiano was founded and three years after the papal order began—Ugo had sent San Damiano a copy of his rule. And in letters to various communities, San Damiano was listed first, as we see here in this slide.

Ugo's rule radically changed the lives of some of these women. One of the most insistent themes was strict enclosure. Even though laymen like Francis and laywomen were finding fulfillment in active service of their neighbors, powerful prelates like Ugo and popes after him believed that women should be strictly cloistered. Most women who entered one of the houses of the papal order, now all referred to as monasteries, would never set foot again outside the confines of their monastery's boundaries. That is, if they were abiding by Ugo's rule.

This touches on one of the most contested questions about Clare and her sisters. Were they always strictly enclosed? Examining text beyond the writings by and about Clare contains important clues. For example, in 1217—about when the papal order was just getting launched—a land sale in a nearby

town mentions a woman named Clare, which, if it refers to Clare of Assisi, as some scholars suppose, means that Clare was leaving the confines of San Damiano.

Non-textual evidence is also enriching our discussions. For example, the specific location of the San Damiano monastery outside Assisi's walls is one piece of a puzzle fitted to others that lead some scholars to think San Damiano was originally a place, before becoming a monastery where Clare and her sisters, like Francis and his early friars, received and tended to the sick and needy.

An artistic representation of Clare that depicts her just beginning her religious life in 1211—this comes from the late 13th century—shows her wearing striped garb associated specifically with late penitents, rather than nuns, shoring up claims that Clare began her religious life, not as a nun and perhaps not even with the plan ever to become a nun.

Clare's own attitudes toward enclosure have been another disputed point, with some people arguing that she never wanted it but bowed to it when pressed by the papacy. But in my mind, the evidence is far too thin to defend this position. The sisters testifying for Clare's canonization refer to their enclosure, they never critique it. If Clare left San Damiano to conduct business from time to time—and there is some evidence that she did—she might still have accepted enclosure as the rule and her forays outside of San Damiano as necessary exceptions.

Moreover, a rule she helped co-author toward the very end of her life includes the enclosure of her sisters. Some scholars theorize that she was forced to include that. It may be, but since cloister has lost some of its sheen in our own day, I wonder sometimes if such theorizing is inadvertently fed by a wish to build up Clare as the put-upon woman coerced by male clerics to a life of involuntary confinement. It's possible, but one needs evidence to make that argument. And as far as Clare's struggles with the male clergy, there are other neuralgic topics where we do have evidence. We should stick to those.

There are two such struggles with plentiful evidence. The first concerns a commitment to a life of poverty, which, for Francis, always signified both poverty, spiritual and material, and humility. Practicing radical material poverty was one of Francis of Assisi's firmest convictions. Clare passionately defended Francis's project of radical poverty, even as many of Francis's friars were defecting from it. While popes and prelates had initially fostered the practice of poverty within its women's order and especially Gregory IX, they—and, again, especially Gregory IX—reached the conclusion that each monastery had to own sufficient property to ensure a steady stream of income for the women.

Why? Two reasons. First, cloistered women—and Gregory was insisting on this—were unable to go out and beg or otherwise support themselves as the friars did. Second, Gregory and later popes wanted the women to devote their lives fully to a life of contemplation rather than other activities, including those which could have garnered some modest income, such as textile work or lending charitable services.

Gregory, when he was still Cardinal Ugo and then later also as pope, began to actively secure each women's monastery with income, sometimes even making donations from his own considerable wealth. The women might live poorly within the monastery, but corporately they had to be financially free from worry. Despite this, for many years Clare and her sisters were able to preserve San Damiano's singular status, insisting on both personal and corporate poverty.

Now, how did she manage this? They had a powerful protector, Francis of Assisi. We have numerous clues that within San Damiano, the sisters followed guidelines that Francis had given them. Some he gave them in writing, others he delivered orally.

Not long before her death, Clare recalled within a rule she helped write, and I'm quoting, "in order that we, as well as those who were to come after us, would never turn aside from holy poverty, the poverty we'd embraced, shortly before his death, Francis repeated in writing his last wish for us. He said, 'I, little Brother Francis, wish to follow the life and poverty of our Most High Lord Jesus Christ and of his Most Holy Mother and to persevere in this until the end. And I ask you, my ladies, and I give you my advice, that you live always in this most holy life in poverty and keep careful watch that you never depart from this by reason of the teaching or advice of anyone.'"

This rule was submitted directly to the papacy. And this was not a throw-off rhetorical flourish Clare entered into the rule, but her blunt message to all that San Damiano would continue to hew to Francis's radical religious poverty, making themselves vulnerable to both personal and corporate insecurity. Moreover, in this same rule, Clare flatly stated that she and her sisters had promised obedience to Francis. Gregory, who respected Francis, probably also feared him.

As Francis's first biographer wrote after Francis's death, but with Clare still alive, there were so many signs of sanctity marking Francis's life that, and I quote, "no one dared speak against him" close quote. Note, too, Francis's warning in the last two lines I've just quoted. "And keep careful watch that you never depart from this by reason of the teaching or advice of anyone." Who might this be?

The line parallels what Clare herself wrote to an ally and another sister, Agnes of Prague, in a letter. In this letter, Clare was urging Agnes to cling to poverty and humility. She told Agnes never to be dissuaded from this commitment. And she writes, "if anyone has said anything else to you or suggested any other thing to you that might hinder your perfection"—and perfection for Clare always meant poverty and humility—"or that would seem contrary to your divine vocation, even though you must respect him, do not follow his counsel."

And note Clare's last point, "even though you must respect him, do not follow his counsel." Historians are in near unanimous agreement that the "someone" in authority who was trying to dissuade Agnes from her commitment to poverty and against whom Clare warned Agnes, was Pope Gregory IX.

This letter was penned some 12 years after Francis's death. Along with the loss of their protector, in the very year after Francis's death, Cardinal Ugo had become elected pope as Gregory IX. Almost immediately, Pope Gregory moved to transform San Damiano from a monastery nominally belonging to the Order of Poor Enclosed Ladies to one fully incorporated and aligned with his rule for the order.

Indeed, it is just on the heels of Francis's death that the new pope begins to refer to the papal order with a new name, the Order of San Damiano, thus, verbally tying Clare and her sisters to leadership within the order.

After Francis's death, Clare's life was marked by struggles to preserve San Damiano's singularity within the papal order. For example, Pope Gregory pressed Clare to accept property that would ensure a regular income stream. Clare roundly refused, telling the pope in a face-to-face, in "encounter" that, and I quote—I thought I had a slide here but I don't. So this is the quote, "I will never in any way wish to be absolved from the following of Christ." So she wouldn't do it. She wouldn't take the property.

Following and imitating Christ, which Clare discusses elsewhere in her writings, always meant following the poor and humble crucified Christ. Probably not coincidentally, around this time in 1228, Clare won an exemption from Gregory known as the privilege of poverty. This exemption allowed San Damiano exceptionally among all the monasteries in the order, the right to refuse all property offered to them. Clare so feared losing this privilege and explicitly impressed upon her sisters, that it is one of the only documents from San Damiano to have been preserved intact to this very day.

And lest we think that only the well-known and relatively powerful Clare and very powerful Agnes of Prague, who came from royalty, engaged in this tussle with Church authorities, there is evidence that other monasteries sympathetic to Clare's vision did their utmost to emulate its poverty. A case in point is the monastery of Monteluce. Around the same time Clare wrote the above letter to Agnes, Gregory was securing the Monteluce nuns' monastery. They had formerly once won, for a time, a privilege of poverty. He was securing them then with profits generated by an indulgence, with gifts of property, and an exemption from paying a tithe on land he had given them.

But about that time, it seems that the nuns wished to return to a life of greater poverty. Gregory shot off a letter to them forbidding them in stark language not to sell or otherwise dispossess themselves of any property without explicit papal permission. We know, too, that he was sending similar warnings to other women's monasteries. But in a stunning turn, the Monteluce nuns proceeded to get rid of some of their property without the requisite papal permission.

How do we know this? Well Gregory's successor as pope, Innocent IV, sent a letter to a bishop ordering him to recover the nuns' property and to forbid them from disposing of any more property in the future. Had the nuns openly defied Gregory's mandate? Had they openly defied him while he was still pope? It's possible. It's also possible that they had waited until his death in 1241 and liberated themselves of their possessions during what is known as a papal vacancy, which refers to the period between one pope's death and the next pope's ascension to the papacy. In this case, that would be Innocent IV's election, and I've tried to graphically display it here; it was a long vacancy. It lasted about 18 months. So whether they were openly defined Gregory IX still alive or astutely making their move while there was no pope, it's clear that these nuns were bold.

The second neuralgic topic for which plentiful evidence exists concerns Clare's profound conviction that she and her sisters were full members of the Franciscan family, just as much a part of it as Francis's own friars. A statement she put into the rules she helped write just before her death is another authoritative passage in which she again speaks in her own first person voice—this is very unusual for a rule—and again quotes what Francis himself said to her and her sisters in his form of life—that's a phrase that refers to a set of guidelines or rules. And he gave this to them at the outset of their religious life. And I'll quote, "After the Most High Heavenly Father saw fit by his grace to enlighten my heart--" Clare's-- "to do penance according to the example and teaching of our most blessed Father Francis shortly after his own conversion, I, together with my sisters, willingly promised him obedience. When the blessed Father--" Francis-- "saw we had no fear of poverty, hard work, trial, shame, or contempt of the world, but instead, we held them as great delights, moved by piety, he wrote a form of life for us as follows:" And here is where she quotes Francis: "Because by divine inspiration you have made yourself daughters and handmaids of the Most High Exalted King, choosing to live according to the perfection of the Holy Gospel, I resolve and promise for myself and for my brothers always to have the same loving care and special solicitude for you as for them."

And note Francis's final promise, "I resolve and promise for myself and for my brothers always to have the same loving care and special solicitude for you as for them." To drive this home, Clare then adds again in her own voice, "As long as he lived, he did diligently fulfill this and he wished that it always be fulfilled by the brothers."

I think she has made her point. Clare is asserting in this rule that the sisters' obedience was to Francis, that his guidelines for them mandated poverty, and that the sisters were and always would be, even after Francis's death, intrinsically linked to the Franciscan friars.

Preserving this linkage is another Herculean struggle that perdured throughout Clare's lifetime. From San Damiano's inception, Francis's friars had easy access to San Damiano. They served as chaplains,

gave sermons, provided sacraments. A few friars always lived alongside San Damiano. At one point, when Pope Gregory was putting obstacles in the way of the friars' access to San Damiano, Clare put the pope on a hot seat by publicly announcing that she would, in consequence, send away all of the friars and this momentously included even those who were begging food and sustenance for the sisters. Often referred to as a hunger strike, one might—and many scholars have—concluded that her act and her pronouncement was a sign of despair. But note how she phrased her announcement. "Let him--" that's Pope Gregory-- "now take away from us all the brothers since he--" Pope Gregory-- "has taken away those who provide us with the food--" spiritual food, she means-- "that is vital."

What is Clare saying here? She's publicly pinning the problem on Gregory. And not only that, she's implicating the friars, as well. For by this time, a few years after Francis's death, numbers of the brothers were backing away from their obligations to women in the order. This, of course, contravened Francis's promise to the women of San Damiano.

But there was another problem as well. Gregory used Francis's promise of allegiance to the women in this single monastery of San Damiano, now incorporated into the papal order, to tie all the friars to the spiritual care of all the monasteries in the order. This was something Francis never envisioned. He led a group of men he wanted to be free to roam here and there, preaching and undertaking other good works. Obligating the friars to the pastoral care of so many cloistered monasteries would tie the friars down.

Let me provide one graphic illustration of the friars' response to this dilemma. The friar Thomas of Celano in his first *Life of Francis* included a lyrical, off-the-charts, poetic encomium to all the women in the order. They are, he said, quote, "a noble structure of precious pearls." Close quote. He praises their charity, humility, virginity, chastity, poverty, abstinence, silence, patience, and contemplation. "Clare," he writes, "is the most precious and strongest stone of the whole structure." He included a truly tear-jerking account of Francis's recently deceased body being brought by San Damiano for the grief-stricken sisters to see one last time and bid adieu.

Thomas wrote this text, this first *Life of Francis*, at the behest of Pope Gregory IX just after Francis died. About 20 years later with Francis long dead but Clare still alive, Thomas was called upon to write yet another *Life of Francis*. This one, notably, doesn't bother even to name Clare. More striking yet, Francis has turned into a misogynist who wants nothing to do with any women. Here is Thomas on how Francis treated holy women, and that would include nuns: "His way of visiting them was rare and constrained but very useful. This was his will for all the brothers whom he wanted to serve for the sake of Christ. He wanted that they might always, like winged creatures, beware of the nets before them." You know how dangerous it is to visit those holy women.

Thomas was reframing Francis's image to reinforce the brothers' new desires to put some distance between themselves and holy women. But Thomas's newly-minted Francis was even more misogynistic with regard to women in general. Thomas writes, quote, "Francis ordered avoiding completely honeyed poison"—that is, familiarities with women—"by which even the holy men are led astray. He said that avoiding contagion when conversing with them, except for the most well tested, was as easy as walking on live coals without burning one's souls." Close quote.

And in various ways, long after Clare's death, there have been notable tactics for putting air between the friars and the women. Let me give you just one example. The very earliest mention we have of the early brothers-- excuse me-- of the Lesser Brothers or the Friars Minor, the names mean the same thing and this is how Francis wanted his friars to be known, as Lesser Brothers, was in a letter written in 1216 by a bishop, a well-known bishop, Jacques de Vitry.

Jacques had been traveling in Italy for the first time. He came from the northern Belgian, Netherlandish region. He'd been traveling in Italy for the first time and he came across and was intrigued by these Lesser Brothers. It's clear from his letter that he hasn't yet heard of Francis of Assisi and doesn't know about him. According to one very influential Latin edition of this letter, Jacques wrote about these travels in Italy.

And he writes—I'll explain this slide in a moment. He writes, "I found one consolation in those parts" of Italy, "Many people of both sexes, rich and worldly, after renouncing everything for Christ, fled the world. They are called Lesser Brothers. They are held in great esteem by the Lord Pope and Cardinals." Jacques proceeds to describe the brothers' zeal for rescuing souls from worldly vanity, how they worked in the day and so forth. He then, according to this Latin edition, described the women he encountered whom he continues to identify as women. You can see underlined in the printed edition Jacques' identification of the men as *Fratres Minores*, that is, Friars Minor, also correctly translated as Lesser Brothers.

On this next slide, I have the same Latin passage with a photo of the manuscript page on which I have scribbled out my deciphering of the Latin letters. Now these can be challenging to read, both because there are many abbreviations and because the handwriting differs markedly from our own. Please note, however, that after the appearance of *Fratres Minores*, and I have an arrow sort of pointing toward that on the right. So after this reference to the Lesser Brothers, there follows the phrase on the next line *Sorores Minores*. There are no abbreviations in this phrase; it's easy to read for anyone who has learned the medieval handwriting.

This phrase which means “and Lesser Sisters” was omitted by the scholar who published the Latin edition. There is no way on earth he could have missed this phrase. The text should read, "they are called Lesser Brothers and Lesser Sisters." This glaring omission was caught by the scholar R.B.C. Huygens only in 1960; that is, just when significant interest in women's history began to emerge.

How can we explain the omission? There are two likely scenarios. The editor skipped the phrase because he found it so at odds with what he believed was the truth, that the Franciscan movement included men alone from its very inception, and he wanted to correct the text. Or perhaps he believed that the revelation that there were Lesser Sisters in early Franciscan history—and remember, this is the first textual mention of any sort to the Lesser Brothers. Perhaps this revelation that there were Lesser Sisters also was too explosive, and he thought it best to suppress it.

The rule into which Clare inserted her first person proclamations along with direct quotations from Francis to shore up her adherence to radical poverty and her conviction that she and her sisters were full-fledged partners in the Franciscan family was approved by the papacy just one day before she died. One other remarkable point and there are many.

But one other point to note is that this rule begins by stating that it is a rule for the Order of Poor Sisters. The order of San Damiano—which by the time of Clare's death in 1253 had expanded beyond Italy into other European countries and included dozens of monasteries—seems to be another order entirely. With this eye-catching phrase, Order of Poor Sisters, Clare seems to be making a declaration of independence from the papal order. She could not have called it the perhaps more apt Order of Lesser Sisters because by this time, the papacy was issuing vociferous denunciations about religious women who continued to model themselves after the friars and identify themselves as Lesser Sisters.

The papacy granted papal approval of the rule Clare helped write not granted to other monasteries, did not grant this approval to other monasteries in the order. So the rule was approved only for the single religious House of San Damiano.

It's important to Clare—the rule and its approval—is signaled by the fact that, like privilege of poverty, Clare's sisters of San Damiano were able to preserve intact the very parchment upon which the rule appears. And it exists to this day in the sisters' monastery in Assisi.

After Clare's death, the narrative about her life quickly changed. Canonized in 1255, the now Saint Clare was presented to the world in an official biography that significantly domesticated many of her struggles. It included forthrightly her tiff with Gregory IX when she refused to accept property and instead gained the privilege of poverty for her House of San Damiano. My research so far suggests that this clash was memorialized in the legend about her in part because the man who had become pope just after Clare's death but before her canonization, a man who had worked for Gregory, had himself some disagreements with Gregory and thus perhaps he didn't mind including Clare's clash with Gregory.

This pope, Alexander IV, had also known Clare rather well and even been instrumental in gaining papal approval for her rule. But the lengthy *Saint's Life*—indeed, there were actually two about Clare, one in prose and the other in verse—omitted many other features of her labored life. Sister Philippa, a sister who had lived with Clare for almost four decades and who gave the lengthiest testimony for Clare's canonization, reported this to the canonization commissioners.

Quote, "At the end of her life, after calling together all her sisters, Clare entrusted the privilege of poverty to them. Her great desire was to have the rule of the order confirmed with a papal bull to be able one day to place her lips upon the papal seal and then on the following day to die. It occurred," says Philippa, "just as she desired. She learned a brother had come with letters bearing the papal bull. She reverently took it even though she was very close to death and pressed that seal to her mouth in order to kiss it," close quote.

The author of Clare's legend drew on the canonization testimonies to compose his *Life of Clare*. He had read Philippa's testimony. Moreover, there are other indications of how critical this rule was to Clare, and yet, this lengthy legend and the other one fails even to mention the existence of the rule.

It's worth noting that the legend author dedicated his *Life of Clare* to the pope at that time, Alexander IV. Now, it was Alexander, before becoming pope, who had helped fulfill Clare's dying wish that her rule be approved. But his affection for Clare notwithstanding, it's clear that he wished to forestall petitions from other monasteries in the papal order eager to have such a rule. Thus, all mention of it was suppressed.

Throughout her life, Clare spoke and wrote of following in imitating Jesus. Of course, it's Francis of Assisi who is known as the *alter Christus*, the other Christ, the one who most completely imitated Christ, especially the report—very contested at the time—that he had received the marks of Christ's wounds in his own body.

But most people fail to note that Francis earned his moniker *alter Christus* only in the early 14th century, that is, about 100 years after he had died. Moreover, while Clare uses the word *imitatio*, imitation, in her writings eight times, Francis, whose writings are at least three times lengthier than Clare's, employs the term just once. And when he does, he's talking about imitating saints. Clare, by contrast, repeatedly speaks of herself and her sisters following and imitating Christ. Yet, almost immediately after her death, Clare, as she is depicted by others, Saint Clare, begins to shape, shift into an imitator of Mary rather than Christ.

To graphically illustrate my point, here are several portrayals of Mary, the Madonna of Mercy, a common way of portraying Mary in medieval and later times. Artistically, this gets transferred to Clare

in the 16th century. Clare has become an *alter Maria*, another Mary or a second Mary, much as Francis in the early 14th century had become the *alter Christus*, the second Christ.

Now, as exalted as the Virgin Mary is, this is something of a downgrade for Clare who thought of herself as a follower and an imitator of Christ, who is, after all, God, whereas Mary, whom Clare also loved, is God's human mother. Note as well that the Clare in this *Madonna of Mercy Fresco* also captures a missed truth about Clare that was first propagated during her life and became established fact, air quotes, after her death. Namely, that she founded the Order of San Damiano. But as I've tried to show, rather than founding an order, it had been an order that found Clare.

Clare was devoted to the Eucharist. But just as I have observed with other female saints, after her life her Eucharistic devotion grows exponentially, often within texts propagated by the clergy, the very men whose status is intricately tied to their ability to consecrate bread and wine.

In The Acts for her canonization, a famous story is repeatedly recounted by the witnesses about how Clare defended the other sisters against a potential incursion into San Damiano by mercenary soldiers identified as Muslims. Clare called for a small box containing the Blessed Sacrament to be brought to her. She then fell prostrate on the ground and begged the Lord to save the sisters and the city of Assisi which, no surprise, happened.

There's no report of her ever handling the box, and it was a box, not a monstrance. But after her death, particularly in the 16th century when Protestants were challenging Catholic Eucharistic theology, Saint Clare began to be depicted in perhaps the most iconic image we have of her holding a monstrance in hand, boldly confronting the enemy soldiers. And here we see the very image used for advertisements for this lecture, and another quite famous painting that I was able to view in the Hermitage Museum in Russia.

But I believe that this late 13th century . . . There's some more depictions. Notice how the monstrance grows. As a matter of fact, you can study the history of monstrances by looking at depictions of Clare with the monstrance.

But in a late 13th century panel painting in the style of a Byzantine icon, Clare's depiction seems to be more on the mark. Here we see Clare standing tall, communicating gravitas with her gaze trained directly on her viewers. She points to the cross of Christ, reminding the viewer that her allegiance is to Christ crucified, poor and humble.

So in this presentation, I've tried to share some evidence about the Clare of history. But people of the past, however much we know about them, are, in many ways, lost to us. We have only fragments of evidence in texts and art and sometimes archeology, which we try to fit together into a cogent fashion. This is most certainly what happens to saints, and if you think about it, there is no such thing as a saint without a venerating public.

So one thing that happens when you read Lives of the Saints is they continually adapt, they are adapted by the writers to keep the saint's life meaningful to the people who are writing the life. Today it seems to me, unlike saints' lives of the past, people are looking for historical truth. They also want moral lessons, but they don't want moral lessons that are built on embellishments or inventions.

So if we are to keep Clare meaningful for today, we have to decide for ourselves, what is it in this historical evidence about Clare that lends us insights that might profit us in terms of our own search for sanctity? So with that, I'd like to quit talking myself and give you a chance, perhaps in five minutes or so, to turn to your neighbor and to talk about this. See if you can come up with something

insightful, critique me, come up with a question that's challenging, or argue, and then we'll come back and we'll have a discussion altogether.

**Participant:** So we read Saint Francis's earlier rule for a class and in it, the rule spoke about avoiding women essentially like the plaguem like in the language you mentioned that had been added to his image. But this was actually his, I think it was his second rule. But yet he had this really beautiful, spiritual relationship with Clare. So is that something that was added as well to his image or where did that come from, given his . . .

**Dr. Mooney:** Well, if you look again at that rule and at the second rule, both rules, the first that was not papally approved, written in 1221, and the second papally approved rule in 1223, each has a passage that's somewhat similar, cautioning the friars not to let women make vows of obedience to them. It doesn't say anything about avoiding women like the plague. But he is cautioning them about creating more linkages with women. Francis accepted the linkage between himself and his friars in San Damiano, but he doesn't say anything overtly against women.

And let me just point to another passage, I'm not sure if it's in both rules or just the later rule. But he has a passage about friars—and I will be paraphrasing because I don't have this memorized—saying that friars who get involved in a scandal of some sort, and one presumes he's talking about sexual scandal with women, are to be dismissed. What I find interesting about Francis in that passage is often in this time when men fell into temptation, the temptress was a woman and the women somehow get blamed, much as it even happens today. How was she dressed? Francis doesn't do that.

So when I search for Francis's writings to see, well, is there truth that he had some kind of over against vis a vie women—maybe I don't want to use the strong word, misogyny—I don't find the evidence. It doesn't mean it couldn't be true but it's not in his writings, it's not in the earliest Lives written about him, it only comes to the fore around the time of this second Life in the late 1940s, I mean, excuse me, 1240s when the brothers are really trying to have no past responsibilities toward the women in the Order of San Damiano.

And around this same time, there is a text that gives a quotation attributed to Francis that's also very misogynistic but it comes from a very late manuscript. So you know, we can't know the entire truth, but I don't see any hard evidence, and it seems too coincidental that when the evidence of Francis being a misogynist gets out there, that it happens at just the time other brothers want to back away from women. Yes?

**Participant:**
Thank you very much. I think this was very informative. Another, my question is this. I have heard, and I don't know where the evidence came from, that after Francis died that the friars depended upon Clare for some information, some inspiration of what the order now should do. How can they carry on without the founder? And that she was one who was sought out for help.

**Dr. Mooney:**
I'm really glad you raised that because in my talk, I often talked about Clare and these women having some struggles with Gregory IX and other male clerics and that's a true picture. It's also a partial picture because Clare had important male allies.

In the very letter, for instance, written around 1238 that Clare cautioned Agnes to stick to poverty and humility and not to be dissuaded by anybody, even if you have to respect him. She says, “listen to the counsel of our Father Elias.”

Who was Elias? Elias was minister general after Francis. He was one of Francis's early companions, someone Frances much admired. Later historiography, I mean, already in the 13th and 14th century, started to demonize Elias and say that he was bringing wealth into the order, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. But if you search Francis's writings, Elias was a close companion and in early evidence, it seems like Elias and Francis remained closely connected.

Clare is saying, “listen to Elias's advice” because Elias was on Clare's side in this. And there were other early companions of Francis, some of his first and closest companions, like Leo, Angelo, Juniper, who all happened to be present at Clare's death, they were with her when she was dying. She did have those companions. And it's interesting that the friars who had a true allegiance to Clare and vise versa were among Francis's first companions, whereas at the time Clare died, leadership had gone over to another set of friars who tended to be more educated, not so familiar with the Umbrian scene, more interested in the internationality of the order, and not so friendly, it seems, with people like Leo and certainly not Elias. And Elias ended up in his own troubles with the papacy, in part because he continued to visit the women's monasteries after Gregory was trying to regulate who could go in them and who could not go in them. As a matter of fact, he was excommunicated for a time and he was deposed as minister general.

So she did have very key male allies. And I'll go back to Pope Alexander IV, who, when he was Cardinal Protector of the Order of San Damiano, he knew that Clare wanted this rule approved. And probably in the neighborhood of a year before he died, Rinaldo, in his capacity as Cardinal Protector, which is the official liaison between the order and the papacy, approved the rule, but Clare was so worried about losing this ability to say no to property that she said “no, I want the pope himself to put his seal on it.” And Rinaldo, as Alexander was called then, was instrumental in getting Pope Innocent IV to say, “okay, I'll approve this rule but just for San Damiano.” Yes?

**Participant:** I was just wondering, at the beginning of your lectures you spoke about the Pope Gregory and I wondered if you know the rationale or could speak to the rationale of why he was so interested in taking control of the orders and giving them land and . . . you know, was there some sort of a motive on his part?

**Dr. Mooney:** Well, I'm glad you raised that because also I was always talking about Gregory sort of in a struggle with Clare. And I don't want to demonize Pope Gregory IX. He and other popes of this era were canon lawyers. The papacy was becoming highly organized and these lawyers wanted to sort of nail down everything and so they were organizing. Prior to Gregory IX, Pope Innocent III, who some people point to as perhaps the most powerful pope in the Middle Ages, he died in 1216, Innocent III had tried to gather religious women in Rome into a single entity but he failed. So this had been an ongoing effort that Cardinal Hugo, later Gregory, saw and finally pulled off.

So they wanted this organization. They didn't want all this diversity. And among this diversity of religious lifestyles that was cropping up, were lifestyles that the papacy and other prelates and people began to worry about. People who weren't just living poorly and humbly and following the crucified Christ, but they were starting to say, “Hey, you prelates, none of you seem to be very poor. We don't like that.”

So some of them were aggressive in a way that Francis never was vis a vie Church authorities. So they were beginning to look askance at some of these people and say, “Look, we've got to make rules,” and at the same time, they made a rule for laypeople who were beginning to follow a religious lifestyle. Gregory had a hand in that.

So he was trying to organize things. And in terms of pressing property on the women, well, he sincerely thought they needed the security. In terms of his belief that they need to be enclosed, well, you know, we still have that issue going on to some extent today where men are in the public sphere and women still preside more in the domestic sphere. Open a newspaper. Whose pictures do you see? Who do we read about? Who do we hear about on TV? Who are the heads of movie studios? It's still very top-heavy men in the public sphere and then women assisting and often confined to more enclosed or circumscribed spaces.

So in a way, he was with the zeitgeist wanting women to have this more enclosed role, and he and other prelates began to object to these women who were living like the friars. And we have numbers of papal letters, letters that go out to bishops around Western Europe saying, "Find these women who are calling themselves Lessors Sisters or Cord Wearers"—the Franciscan friars wore cords and everything—"who were parading as if they actually have something to do with this Franciscan movement and stop them."

So that's why Clare, in this final rule, if she was indeed the one who coined the phrase Order of Poor Sisters, and I think she might have been, probably wouldn't use the more apt phrase Order of Lesser Sisters. So, you know, Gregory was a man of his times, he was doing what he thought was appropriate, it hit some women as draconian and I think it hits modern ears as draconian, but it's less so if you put him back in the 13th century. Yes?

**Participant:** Could [INAUDIBLE]?

**Dr. Mooney:** Well, you know, one thing that I couldn't include is . . . and if you want to read one thing by Clare, I think the thing I'd recommend would be to read her Letters to Agnes of Prague. In a common English translation, it's easily accessible and I'm sure you can also find these on the web. The letters probably amount of 17 pages, or something like that. And when I first read them many years ago as a master's student, and I'm reading them quickly because teachers assigned much more reading then than they do today. In my day, we had to read a lot. I raced through them and I thought, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. You know, be holy, follow Jesus, et cetera. There didn't seem to be a lot of depth there.

When I went back and read them again I thought, oh, these letters actually have some intricacy here. She's playing off different themes in intricate ways, and when I wrote my book about Clare, I devoted a whole chapter to these letters. And what I began to see more clearly, then, is certain themes that she highlights in those letters, across four letters written across a span of time of about 20 years. She talked about poverty and humility in all the letters. That's a prominent leitmotif. She also talks about following and imitating Christ in the letters, and then she begins to talk more in the later letters about what I would call a kind of transformation of the person into God.

Picking up on a common metaphor used in those days, the mirror, she tells Agnes to gaze at the mirror of the crucified Christ. So the idea is that gazing at the cross of Christ, one sees a mirror. What does she mean by that? You look at Christ poor, humble, suffering, giving everything for love for the sake of other people. Suffering for love, not suffering for suffering's sake, which is sort of a terrible thread that mars the tapestry of Christian history, but suffering for love's sake. You see in that who you should truly be, poor and humble and taking on suffering. Not to suffer because we are worms and deserve it, but because love always brings suffering with us. If you truly love, you can love more and more and it's going to have a cost.

So she counsels Agnes to that and it seems that by the end of these letters, she's talking about not only following Christ, but sort of becoming Christ. So this would pick up on a notion we normally

identify with Eastern Christians in which human beings are divinized. Early Church fathers like Athanasius made statements like, "God became human so that humans could become God." It sounds blasphemous to Western ears because we're really big on the Fall and sin and punishment.

I'm not saying sin doesn't exist, et cetera, et cetera. But the Eastern Christians, and I see now more and more in subtler ways in some Western writers like Clare of Assisi, that they, too, see this possibility of growth into something that's beautiful, something that's full love, a love so powerful that one is mimicking becoming Godlike. And remember, orthodox Christian theology teaches that human beings are made in the image and likeness of God. And with sin, that image that we have deep inside ourselves, God's own image in our deepest selves becomes tarnished. But with certain practice, and she's telling Agnes, through contemplation of the crucified Christ, that tarnish gets wiped off and the mirror image that one is becomes so like God that one is Godlike, or if you're going to push the envelope here, Clare didn't say this, but one is divinized. And we can go back to the authority of people like Athanasius, Church fathers who put this forward as a notion that was not ruled as unorthodox.

So, you know, I think reading Clare's letters, you'll get a sense of who she is. The rule also is very interesting. It's often referred to as the first rule written by a woman for religious women. But there's an interesting story about this. That was a phrase that was coined, I think in 1985, by a Franciscan who'd done important work on Clare's writings. And then it was repeated by everyone; because it was such a good phrase, everybody stole it. Plus 1980's, we're looking for women who are feminist prototypes, et cetera, and so it was really kind of a nice thing to say about Clare.

My first interest in Clare, actually, had to do with that phrase, because when I read the rule, I thought, well, how do they know she wrote this? It doesn't say she wrote it. It has these first person quotations, but then it has all this other stuff. How do we know who wrote this rule?

So one of the things I did for my book, and I have a chapter on this, is I went back through all the significant writings about Clare that I could find, from her death up until the 21st century, to find out where is the primary source proof that she authored the rule. None in the 13th century, none in the 14th, 15th, 16th, 17th. The earliest mention I find of this is in the late 20th century, by a scholar who misread what he was looking at. And it didn't take off right away, but then some scholars lent in that direction in the early 1900s, and then again especially around the time when people were becoming interested in women's history, suddenly Clare turns into the sole author of this rule.

But one of the notable things about this rule that many people have pointed out is that it includes a kind of, it has a hierarchy, of course. A head of the monastery, sisters who are important advisors, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. It is a kind of consensual form of government also there. For instance, if someone's going to be admitted into the monastery, a new woman, the group's going to talk about it. They're going to be stuck living with her, maybe for decades, so let's see, are we all agreed on this person?

So there's a little more horizontality in the rule; it's not just a top down structure. And that, in itself, tells me too, well, if Clare was going to put together a rule, wouldn't she be consulting with other people? It seems that she did that. I think there are signs that perhaps Rinaldo himself, who was a canon lawyer and who was her advocate, had a hand in the more juridical aspects of the rule. Or if not him, some other canon lawyer. Clare didn't put together all of these canonically sounding phrases.

Her sisters seem to appear in the rule because there are also some "we" statements. "We subscribe to a life of poverty." Why would Clare have switched from her own singular "I" statements to "we" statements? So I think it's clearly coauthored. This is not to underestimate Clare's important influence

on the rule, especially with these quotes that I shared. But I think it's to kind of set the record straight that her becoming the sole author is a pretty recent phenomenon and I hope I'm going to turn the tide on that.

[SIDE CONVERSATION]

**Participant:** I was just wondering, how did she expect the women to come up with the resources to live and not go out begging if she was so much against having any property or that sort of thing?

**Dr. Mooney:** Well, yeah. There's a phrase often attached to Clare, absolute poverty. What is absolute poverty? There's really no such thing. Poverty is relative. I mean, all we have to do is look at all the people in the world who say they're poor, some of whom are quite rich. Many people who say they have a vow of poverty live pretty well. They may not have the latest iPhone, but . . .

So absolute poverty, I think, is not a good phrase to use. I think we can assume that the sisters lived very austerely. The reports in the canonization testimony certainly suggests that Clare did. She had very harsh bedding and she ate very little. As a matter of fact, Francis and the local bishop had to command her to eat more because she was fasting far too strictly. It probably brought on an illness that lasted for many years toward the latter part of her life. So they would live poorly.

But they would have probably a garden. They had these friars who went out and begged for them. It could be there were donations of different sorts. It's even possible they were given some money for some of the vestments and things like that the sisters sewed and distributed to the parish priests, not because they were selling it at a profit, but maybe as some kind of remuneration. So they had something there, but she wanted to sort of keep that sense of vulnerability: that. we don't have a secure pension plan here; things tomorrow could change; maybe the brothers won't be able to gather that many alms.

As a matter of fact, one of the interesting stories told about her in the canonization inquest has to do with a time when the sisters had very little food and a sister brought to her a piece of bread, a loaf of bread, saying, "This is all we've got" and there were, I think, 51 sisters living in the monastery at that point. And the story is—which is kind of a saint's tale, it's hard to know what to make of it in the 21st century—was that Clare made the Sign of the Cross over the loaf. And this is one of the ways in which she's also sort of emulating Christ, making the Sign of the Cross, and it's actually kind of a priestly act. And she's depicted in a panel painting in the late 13th century with her hands like this over the bread, which is the way Pope Innocent III was counseling priests to make the Sign of the Cross at that time in remembrance of the Trinity.

She makes a Sign of the Cross over the bread, and guess what happens: multiplication of bread. So this is also kind of a mimicking of Christ. So the sisters say this about her, that she was Christ-like, but here we do know that they had been suffering from hunger, and that probably happened more than once that they had to get along on very little food.

**Dr. Jane Regan**: Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

**Dr. Mooney:** Thank you all.

[MUSIC PLAYING]