

**VULNERABLE LOVE**  
***Pondering the Mystery with Clare of Assisi***

*“I hold this memory in my heart,  
and my spirit dissolves within me.”*

Clare of Assisi, 4<sup>th</sup> *Letter to Agnes*, line 26.

Vulnerability flooded through my being recently as I underwent some hip surgery. She had become my friend before, when, in the spring-time of my life, I felt that my heart was broken. Yet, this experience was quite different. It involved a deeper level of my consciousness. A new level of fragility and dependency was thrust into my awareness. In my earlier experience of a broken heart, I felt a major turning point when, gazing at the vulnerable and wounded body of Christ, I sensed in the very depths of who I was, that as Christ was being crucified, I was being crucified. There was wounded love. In the midst of a very long dark night, while gazing into the wounded body of Christ, I knew Christ was not alone, I was not alone. My wounds were one with the wounded Christ. The haunting poem, “Dark Night,” by John of the Cross, that I kept reciting during the impasse of this dark night became mine. I felt our suffering infuse and the wounds of one become the wound of the other. This incredibly vulnerable and tender encounter with the wounded, crucified Christ was crucial to my healing.

This time, as vulnerability seeped in, there were no images. I was drawn into an abyss where control has no power, no voice, no possibility of existence. This was not like the struggle Jacob had where his hip gave way in a tussle with the Holy One. For me, it was an invitation whispered in the ground of my being to be vulnerable and do nothing but breathe, to breathe and just keep breathing into the ground of oneing love. While monitors pulsed and lights glared and I felt my body had been gashed, words from the *Book of Wisdom* just kept flowing through me: “In the midst of silence a word was spoken” (Wis 18:14-15). I knew these words were being uttered from the vast silence in the ground of my heart that is the home of the eternal Word who became flesh. There was no physical silence in the room. My body ached, medical noise surrounded me. And yet, in the deepest truth of who I was, I felt a deep, intimate and expanding Silence, a presence infusing me within and beyond my body. I knew the eternal Word was being spoken - my deepest reality was in the ground of eternal Love. I knew I was being called to live this experience in solidarity with all those who suffer, to meet them in their suffering and through my oneness in the Word spoken within me in Love, participate in crucified love and make love a stronger energetic field in our world.

As I write this reflection, during the Lenten journey of entering into the paschal imagination of a Crucified God with us, my heart often weeps at the dualisms in the Christology that makes God so aloof, and us so blame worthy. Sadly, the guilt-ridden image of a perverse humanity who needed Christ to become human to appease the Father and die for our sins, still haunts the Christian consciousness. Yet, the tradition tells a much richer story that celebrates the incarnation as the great cosmic story of infinite Love manifest in finite reality. In this reflection, I wish to draw on the wisdom of Clare of Assisi (1194-1253) and show how her vision of crucified love is, as I experienced in my times of suffering, of a vulnerable poor lover who is one with us, meets us in the midst of suffering and in an exchange of mercy, transforms suffering into resurrection joy. We will see how embracing crucified love draws us into the eternal womb of compassion to participate in the suffering of humankind and creation and contribute our love to the evolution of the Word becoming flesh. Clare assists us to plunge into what is most fragmented and incomplete and experience the mystical exchange of love in

the midst of suffering. She draws us to see from within the eternal shining within the very depths of suffering.

We are invited into Clare's wisdom through her four brief letters to Agnes, a princess of Prague (1211-1282), who desired to be a Poor Clare. As Ilia Delio reminds us, in *Clare of Assisi: A Heart Full of Love*, (Cincinnati: St Anthony Messenger Press, 1993, xxi), Clare's spirituality does not develop systematically in her letters, but rather shines out like: "a finely stitched pattern on a soft delicate cloth. One has to read her letters," Ilia advises, "slowly and prayerfully as she weaves her ideas into the pattern of Christ." And Edith Van den Goorbergh and Theodore Zweerman, (*Light Shining Through a Veil, The Netherlands: Peeters, 2000, 29*), speak of Clare as: "weaving together" threads of faith, "knotting together" poverty and perfection. From the depths of her own intimacy with the Poor One, Clare embroiders a tender and loving icon of vulnerable love endlessly meeting us in the depths of our own and communal vulnerability. She encourages us to awaken a deep, penetrating, interior gaze that sees from within the depths of our oneness with the vulnerable Christ.

### **A Vulnerable Gaze**

To be vulnerable is to be wounded and capable of suffering. It is to be moved physically, emotionally and spiritually to the depths of our heart or womb, to experience compassion, and changed by the experience. In writing to Agnes, who is facing her own limits in the opposition she is experiencing, Clare encourages Agnes to be vulnerable and to embrace Christ by gazing deeply into the icon of crucified love. The gaze that Clare teaches is a gentle flow of gazing, considering, contemplating, and desiring to imitate the Poor Christ (*Intuere, considera, contemplare, desiderans imitari*) (Letter 2.20). The gaze that Clare invites Agnes, (and us) to awaken, is *intuere*, the deep penetrating gaze of the eye of the heart beholding. This gentle, intuitive way of seeing, that lingers, ponders, rests in and imitates the Poor Christ makes us one. Clare's language is passionate as she takes us deeper into the gaze, into the depths of the heart of the Poor Christ who is pure *kenosis*, absolute Love poured out.

### **Icon of Crucified Love**

Clare's words resound with compassion as she dramatically portrays for Agnes an icon of Crucified Love. Vividly, she exposes the absolute humility, the poverty of a crucified God who is: "vulnerable, despised, beaten, and bruised repeatedly, all over his body, suffering and dying in the midst of all human anguish." (Letter 2: 20). Notice the naked defenselessness of Christ in the "midst" of human fragmentation and anguish, in the middle, in the center of the fragility of the broken world. In the icon of such profound poverty we see what in Clare's day was described as a *commercium* (Letter 1.30). Crucially, this *commercium*, literally a commercial exchange, is not payment to God, but *com-mercium*, the tender exchange of mercy arising in the depths of human degradation and misery. The torment of Christ is the sorrow of God embracing the torment of human anguish. Clare invites Agnes, and us, to enter into the experience of the poor Christ who is our vulnerable God continually pouring out Love from Love. Immersing us in vulnerability she then she draws us further, into this overflow of love as our lingering gaze becomes "considering." We ruminate and experience our intimacy with wounded Jesus of Nazareth, our wounded God, wounded humanity, wounded creation and our own wounded heart, all held in unity in this outrageous out-pouring of Love. Just as I experienced as my wounds and Christ's wounds became one, the gaze draws us into the personal and cosmic wound, in the intensity of the suffering of God.

Clare invites Agnes to be one with the Poor Christ, not as a miserable sinner, but in an exchange of mercy and love between lovers. This exchange is like an eternal marriage, where the poverty of love poured from the heart of Christ and the poverty of love poured out from the heart of Agnes infinitely infuse one another. Agnes loves, touches and takes Christ to herself as a bridal spouse (Letter 1.8). Clare reminds us that it is only in the spaciousness of a poor, open, free heart, unattached to anything, that we can enter into the hidden depths of the exchange of love as lover and beloved. In this exchange the treasure hidden within the world and our hearts emerges (See Letter 3.7) and we enter into the eternal mystical marriage.

The icon of the crucified Poor One marks the point of necessary vulnerability, the free choice to suffer, to openly embody all that is unfinished, in order for the total exchange of love pouring into love to evolve. The battered body of Jesus is the icon that holds all that is violent, life-denying and destructive as it knits and weaves together all forces that oppose union, into the powerful energy of pure love, into the pattern of Christ, into the light of eternity. The icon holds the great paradox of divine and human oneness in vulnerability that transforms into resurrected being. Clare then takes Agnes into the infinity of such profound intimacy, to see how the icon of crucified love is the icon of everlasting love which she calls the mirror of eternity.

### ***Icon of the Eternal***

After immersing us in the vulnerability of God in the crucified Poor One, Clare takes us deeper into the darkness of contemplation, beyond words and images, to be transformed into luminous resurrected life. Gazing, considering, contemplating reveals how the tortured body of Christ becomes radiantly luminous love. Perhaps influenced by the incandescence of the golden *San Damiano Cross*, with its peaceful, serene body of Christ, whose open eyes are like depthless pools of eternity, Clare reveals how poverty, humility and love shine in the mirror and draw us into the splendor and glory of the eternal. Clare's heart meets our heart as she invites:

Place (*pone*) your mind (*mentum*) in the mirror of eternity (*speculo aeternitatis*),  
Place your soul (*animus*) in the splendour of glory (*splendore gloriae*),  
Place your heart (*cor*) in the figure of the divine substance or essence (*divinae substantia*),  
and, through contemplation, transform your entire being  
into the image of the Divine One,  
so that you, yourself, may also experience the friendship of lovers  
and taste the hidden sweetness that God has kept from the beginning  
for all those who love God (Letter 3.12-2).

I remember when I first heard this beautiful poetry, I was enraptured. The invitation is to love totally to give all, to imitate the Poor One by pouring our mind, our soul, our heart, our body into the dark, luminous radiance of our vulnerable, crucified love, and then beyond, into the infinity of intimacy in the mystical marriage. We fall into love totally, in Clare's words: "Love totally the one who gave his whole life for your love." (Letter 3.16). For our ego, or selfed-self, this can feel dangerous, because it will lose power. For our heart-self, this is the only response we can make. Clare urges us to surrender all that we are, to be vulnerable so that, through contemplation, we may experience our oneness with crucified, eternal Love.

The invitation to gaze into Christ, who is a mirror, catches our imagination with its multilayered implications. Literally, in Clare's day a mirror was a highly polished, circular, convex, metal disc that gave a true likeness when the one who gazed into the mirror was centered in the middle of the mirror, at the centre point. If the beholder was off-centre, the image would be distorted. Therefore, to gaze into the Mirror of Eternity and receive a true vision, we must be face to face, mind in mind, heart in heart, body in body, centered in the center of the Eternal One. Then, Christ the mirror becomes a liminal space, a threshold into the infusing energy of the exchange of love in the mystical marriage where our mind, our soul, our heart participate in the kiss of oneness in Christ. Christ mirrors back to us one face, the face of pure love. We see our essential identity is in Christ. In the Mirror of Eternity all that feels scattered from our essence transforms.

In the tradition of writings about contemplation, the mirror image points to the inner luminosity of our soul, one in Christ. It highlights the transition point where the humility of the crucified Christ manifests the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24). As in the Letter to the Colossians, the Crucified One is an: "image (icon or mirror) of the unseen God and the first-born of all creation...who holds all things in unity." (Col 1:15-17). Holding all things in unity, Christ is the mirror, the icon who connects heaven and earth, transcendent and finite. Christ draws all creation forward, beyond suffering, into a radiant present, into the pure silence of the naked now, to be conscious, aware of ourselves as one in eternal love.

### **Implications**

There are many connections and implications for our *Contemplative Evolutionary Network*, but I will draw out three predominant forward movements.

First, Clare shows us how to imitate Christ by embracing suffering, with a contemplative, evolutionary heart, by taking us into our own personal naked vulnerability, into the dying of the crucified, into emptiness, into the transforming light of contemplation where the radiance of resurrection emerges. Suffering, darkness, abandonment, death are not ends in themselves, but expose the infusing presence of the divine Spouse. Clare invites us to be happy, by becoming icons of contemplation, contemplating these blissful delights in our daily living. She urges us to "taste the hidden sweetness", to savor and drink deeply at the sacred banquet of our own life journey, to adhere to Christ with all our heart in all that we are and do (See Letter 4.9). When our suffering uncovers the depths of our transcendent nature in Christ, Clare assures us that we are drawn into resurrection, into the mirror of eternity where the radiance of divine beauty becomes reflected in our being. We hold this memory in our mind and we catch fire from this burning radiance as it continuously releases new energy for us to participate more fully in our mystical marriage and be one.

Second, meeting our vulnerable God in the depths of suffering, as Clare invites us to do, releases the energy of love and frees our heart-self to emerge from the depths of our being in God. When our deep hearts meet other deep hearts, we build a stronger noosphere of heart consciousness. We empower the evolutionary potential pointed to by Teilhard de Chardin, and Ilia Delio, to recognize the intense energy hidden within suffering and release its ascending force. Teilhard reminds us: "Suffering holds hidden within it, in extreme intensity, the ascensional force of the world. The whole point is to set this force free by making it conscious of what it signifies and what it is capable." He encourages us to see how if all those who suffer in the world were: "simultaneously to turn their suffering into a

single shared longing...if they were to unite their suffering so that the pain of the world could become one single grand act of consciousness, of sublimation, of unification, would not this be one of the most exalted forms in which the mysterious work of creation could be manifest to our eyes." (Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe*, New York, Harper and Roe, 93-94). As we enter into contemplation, in our CEN community, we consciously experience our suffering as an act of longing that all those who suffer may be drawn into the exchange of mercy. We desire that all be drawn into the mystical marriage, and abide in the infinity of intimacy in eternal love. In the vulnerability of our heart ache for so much agony within creation, we meet the desire of our vulnerable God. Suffering becomes transformed into compassion, into a powerful centrifugal force for more love, more mercy, more peace.

Third, Raimon Panikkar reminds us that in this century, it is crucial that we learn to flow in the deep arteries of the mystical body of reality. He affirms how our essential task in life, is to complete, to perfect our icon of reality. (See Raimon Panikkar, *The Fullness of Man*, New York: Orbis Press, 2010, xx). Each of us is an icon, a mirror of Christ, with a heart whose centre encloses the treasures of divinity and humanity, whose arteries flow and bring life to the whole mystical body of Christ. Clare illuminates how our deepest identity is in this eternal intimacy. She takes us into nondual consciousness, beyond words, into the radiant, silent, serene, intimate light of eternal vulnerability that ceaselessly pours out love in an exchange of suffering in love becoming joy. This is the invitation into eternal light I experienced in my recent vulnerability where I felt infused in Love's Silence as I lay helplessly in pain. Clare invites me to yield, and to yield, into the beauty, into the love, into the fulfilment of this icon of my reality, which of course is also our communal invitation. Clare's exquisite poetry evoking the two spouses in the Song of Songs resounds in the symphony of the noosphere. She addresses us personally and communally to join her in the wine cellar of contemplation and sing together in the symphony of love:

*Draw me after you and we will run  
in the fragrance of your perfume  
O my Heavenly Beloved."*

*I will run and never grow weary,  
until you bring me into the wine cellar,  
until your left hand is under my head  
and your right hand embraces me gently  
and you kiss me with the kisses of your mouth (Letter 4:28-32).*

May we as a communion of vulnerable lovers, be inebriated in the fragrance of the perfume of divine vulnerability and know what it is to be truly human. May we never grow weary of being infused in the transforming wisdom of contemplation and yield into the growing edge of consciousness in becoming one single grand act of consciousness, of sublimation, of unification, that is enflamed in the Christic kiss. In the wine cellar of contemplation dualisms dissolve. We know ourselves in the radiance of glory. We recognize ourselves in the essence of our Christic nature. Our Omega nature glows in the mirror of eternity.

- The translations of Clare's Letters are my own taken from the Latin in: Edith Van den Goorbergh and Theodore Zweerman, *Light Shining Through a Veil*. The Netherlands: Peeters, 2000.

## **PRAYING CONTEMPLATIVELY**

### ***An Invitation to Contemplation***

Drawing on Clare's wisdom, here are some suggestions for our contemplative time together.

#### ***Entering into Silence***

Immersed in the pain of the suffering of our world

I arise, tentative,  
softly centering,  
inner depths quivering.

Poor and vulnerable,  
we are one-in-another, infusing  
boundlessly.

One eye, one seeing, one being.

Infinite Love pours into  
the midst of all suffering.

Crucified love  
poured out for all.

In this darkness  
in the deep silence  
of my heart

I come to silence to gaze, to consider, to contemplate ...

#### ***Ruminating on Scripture***

Although the Beloved's state was divine,  
Love did not cling to transcendence.  
Love emptied Love's self, poured out Love, became a servant,  
and was born as we are;  
and being as we are, Love became humble, sensual, finite, of the earth  
accepting suffering and death, death on a cross.

From the midst of this deep dying, Infinite Love raised the Beloved high  
and bestowed the name, which is beyond all other names  
so that all beings in the heavens,  
on earth and in the underworld,  
should celebrate the name, Jesus.

And every tongue acclaim  
Jesus, the Christ is the Mirror of Eternity,  
Omega, radiating  
the glory of Infinite Love. (My translation of Phil 2:6-11).

- Now through a glass darkly... 1 Cor 13:12.
- For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and image of divine goodness. Although she is but one she can do all things, and while remaining

in herself, she renews all things. Wis 7:26

- Christ is the image of the unseen God and the first-born of all creation ... who holds all things in unity. Col 1:15 –17
- Christ is the radiant light of God's glory and the perfect mirror of the divine nature, sustaining the universe with the power of love. Heb 1:3
- Place me in a secret wine cellar and set a banner of love over me. Sg 2:4
- Place me as a seal on your heart, a seal on your arm. Sg 8:6

### ***Contemplatio***

*A treasure beyond compare is hidden in the field of creation and human hearts* (Letter 3.7).

I invite you to take some time for silence and draw your awareness into your heart and become aware of your sense of vulnerability, the groaning of creation and the suffering in all the violent places of the world. Clare encourages us not to be overwhelmed by suffering, but to gaze with the eye of our heart, and consider how here is a poor, humble crucified God, present in the midst of all suffering.

- Picture the face of someone suffering, gaze more deeply and see how there is the vulnerability of God, there is the mirror of the crucified one, the mirror of the cross, the mirror of eternal intimacy. Bring the suffering person with you as you go more deeply into your own heart.
- Notice how you are being drawn further into the mirror of Christ, feel the yearning of the stirrings of love and the dark luminosity of the centre drawing you.
- Gently release into the energy of the yearning of vulnerable love, as love enfolds you into the centre, into the still point.
- Softly rest in the eternal embrace of love drawing all that is vulnerable into the vulnerability of God.
- When you feel the stirring to draw the prayer time to closure, give thanks.

### ***The Music of Silence***

Vulnerable silence whispers of the eternal.

### **BLESSING**

Luminous mirror of poverty, mirror of eternity,  
Boundless love of the cosmos,  
May we see with the tender loving of your gaze  
the radiance of your love mirrored in creation.  
May your illuminating shafts of light  
penetrate and enfold us in your organic oneness,  
in you, in creation, in the cosmos. Amen.