



**Annual Franciscan Federation Conference
Keynote Address – Joanne Schatzlein OSF
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**Talk 3
Pilgrimage of Healing: Gift of Clare at San Damiano**

INTRODUCTION

San Damiano

In San Damiano, built as an addition above the church Francis repaired, is the dormitory where around 40-45 women shared sleeping space. It is here that Clare healed many of her Sisters (as shared in their testimonies for Clare's canonization). It is here that others brought those who were ill, asking for Clare to intercede to God for healing for their loved one. Sometimes she would refer these people to her mother Ortulana.

- **Ramona Miller's** story of a young mother with an obviously ill child.
- **Andre Cirino's** story of the coming of a Poor Clare group into the dormitory, spontaneously breaking into tears
- The **healing rituals** that often move pilgrims to tears, and impact others who pass by as the ritual is unfolding.

In the Dormitory

All of these stories speak to the power emanating from this holy place. Murray Bodo, colleague, pilgrim leader and friend, describes it this way in his poem entitled "The Rooms of St. Clare." He begins with a quote from Virginia Woolf:

One has only to go into any room in any street for the whole of that extremely complex force of femininity to fly in one's face.

He then leads us through the rooms of Clare in San Damiano, and says this upon entering into the dormitory:

*But it is the steep ascent from choir
through the narrow passageway
opening into their Bridal Chamber
That lifts Clare and the Poor Ladies above routine.
For there is the room of redemptive suffering where
Clare ministers to her sick sisters,
lies bedridden sewing albs and altar linens.
There she opens the door, kneels
before her Eucharistic Lord, and
prays away the threatening advances
of the Emperor's mercenary soldiers.*



*There in the room of consummations
she holds her Rule that holds
all the rooms of the Poor Ladies' lives.
She presses the Book of Rooms to her heart and
crosses the final threshold into all the rooms
of her life.*

This is what we will be journeying toward as we look at Pilgrimages of Healing

PILGRIMAGES OF HEALING

Medieval Medical Knowledge

- **Medieval medical knowledge** would be considered crude in our highly technological age of research and healing. There were early medical schools in Bologna and Padua, but medicine relied on the wisdom of **Galen, Hippocrates** and **Aristotle**. They diagnosed through observation. Their construct of **4 humors** (blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile), **four qualities** (hot, cold, moist and dry) and their correlation in man and in woman led to some assumptions about temperaments, physical illness and healing remedies. For example: men were hot/dry, therefore intelligent. Women were cold/moist, therefore promiscuous.
- **Median age** for women was 25 due to the dangers of childbirth and 35 for men due to participation in multiple wars and crusades. The Medieval person viewed illness much like other acts of God. God speaks and it happens. According to Sumption,

“This was not only a reflection of the inadequacy of medical science. At the root of it was a powerful conviction that physical diseases had spiritual causes. Illness was brought on by sin, from which it followed that penitence at the shrine of a saint effaced not only the sin but the illness as well.”
- **Mental illness** was the most difficult to assess and remedy. It was viewed as a diabolical involvement, evidenced in many of the healing stories in the gospels.
- Again according to Sumption, *“The conviction that sin was the origin of sickness does much to account for the confidence with which people relied on healing saints.”*
- **Involvement by the clergy** in performing any medical acts such as cauterization or blood letting was expressly forbidden by Innocent III. The Fourth Lateran Council canons stipulate against this involvement and goes on to state that bodily ailments originate from sin or spiritual origins.
- Some **afflictions** were particularly liable to be regarded as having **Divine origins: leprosy being one of them.**



Seeking Miracles

- Pilgrims sought out healing at the **Tombs of Saints**, believing that the closer you were to their remains, their relics, the more likely you were to receive God's healing through their intercession. Of course the lines of who was actually doing the healing began to get blurred.
- We know **Ortulana traveled to Monte Gargano** to seek assurance of the safe delivery of her first child, Clare. Many pregnant women traveled there because of a miraculous intervention on the part of St. Michael the Archangel for a woman who had a breech presentation and was unable to deliver her child.
- We know of the power of **Lourdes** today
- Miraculous healing is at issue shortly after the time of Francis' death. Because there are few miracles happening as a result of visiting **Francis' Tomb**, most pilgrims are going to the **Porziuncola to seek indulgences** and forgiveness. In 1300 a decision is made to remove a "**rood screen**" that blocks access to the grate in a step leading to the high altar at Francis' tomb church. Everyone knows Francis is buried "somewhere" below, and only the privileged can kneel at this step and pray for Francis' intercession. **Removing the rood screen and rerouting the pilgrims through the lower basilica eventually to the step closest to Francis' tomb brings pilgrims back in droves, and miraculous occurrences are recorded.** See Bill Cooks book: *The Art of the Franciscan Order in Italy*, especially the articles by Donal Cooper and Janet Robson.
- **In this "Cook book"** a story is told that William of England, [who was buried with Bernard, Sylvester and other of Francis companions at an altar below the Cimabue Francis in the Lower Basilica,] was the cause of more miracles than Francis was, and Elias of Cortona prayed to him to tone it down!!! **p. 32**

Hospices

- **Hospices** were established to care for ill pilgrims who were traveling to seek a miraculous cure. Some hospices were located in monasteries where there were **libraries** containing books written by the two greats, Galen and Hippocrates.
- In preparing for a pilgrimage it was important to **know where these hospices were.** (Today we have a whole list of hospitals in case of emergencies ... Stories could be told about our experiences in **Italian hospitals**...according to American standards, these are more like the hospices of old!)
- These were run by people who were "**called to receive, welcome, and comfort the sick, the blind, the weak, the lame, the deaf, the dumb, and the starving.**" (Sumption, p. 284)



- **The hospices were comfortless**...no food was served, pilgrims slept on straw covered floors, if there were beds they were often dirty and filled with fleas....but pilgrims were grateful for any space at all. Monotony and boredom were sometimes the greatest challenges.
- Fortunately for pilgrims, the **virtue of charity** was a constantly recurring theme in sermons and devotional literature. This virtue was lived out in **care given at hospices and leprosariums**. Those ministering **understood that they were serving Christ**, who identified himself in the gospel as the one given food, drink and comfort when in need.
- We believe **San Damiano was such a hospice**, named after the two physician saints, Cosmos and Damian. It was well located on a major road leading to Santiago de Compostella and back to Rome. I believe Francis and Clare would have been aware of this history, and their presence there continued its mission of healing.

Ex-Votos

Briefly, ex-voto offerings were usually wax models of whatever part of the body had been healed. They were left at the site to commemorate a miraculous cure or a prayer that has been answered.

ILLNESS/SUFFERING IN THE FRANCISCAN TRADITION

Francis and Clare were two persons who knew intimately what it meant to suffer both physically and psychologically.

- **Francis' illnesses** are well known and described in the Sources on his life. But more recently there has been added focus on **his psychological challenges** from his brothers. **Jacques Delarun in *The Misadventure of Francis of Assisi*** discusses the accounts of "We Who Were With Him" who admit that Francis was neglected by those who disagreed with his ideals. Donald Spoto in *The Reluctant Saint* focuses on the challenges of Francis in the final years of his life, outlining his illnesses, and from his lay perspective is able to confront Franciscans with the reality that Francis felt alone and battled **disillusion, depression, and concern** that he had actually accomplished what God wanted of him.
- **Clare** herself believed she would die before Francis. Because she dies at age 60, well beyond the median age for women, whatever illness she thought she had must have been linked to her **mystical encounters with the suffering Christ**, much like Theresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena and other women mystics who embraced physical suffering as a source of union with Christ who suffered and died. **Her psychological challenges would become most prominent after Francis' death. While Francis had to contend with his brothers, she would have to contend with the Popes.**



- Both Francis and Clare were healed and transformed through constant listening to and meditation on the San Damiano Crucifix. As they gazed, considered, contemplated and then imitated this Christ, **“they became that upon whom they gazed.”**
- **Prayer before this crucifix transformed their suffering** into experiences of Redemption. This became the source of their healing power to others. **The cross was Clare’s symbol** imprinted on the foreheads of her sisters who asked her intercession for healing. **The cross ultimately transformed Francis’ entire being**, imprinting on him the marks of Him whom Francis longed to follow, assuring him that he had indeed accomplished what God had asked of him.
- This explains why Francis, in some of his darkest moments, could compose *The Praises of God* and *The Canticle of the Creatures*. It is out of her experiences of suffering that Clare could craft **letters of hope** to Agnes, and experience events of Joy from a distance...her presence at the Christmas Mass in the Basilica of St. Francis while alone at San Damiano.

As a consequence of having their “Eyes Fixed on Christ” ...

- **Relationships among the brothers and sisters were affected in deep ways.**
 - Francis sent **Brother Stephen**, suffering from a mental illness of some sort, to Clare for healing...this despite the great reluctance to cause scandal by frequenting the monasteries of women other than for ministerial needs. And Francis responds to **Leo** in his distress leaving one of the most beautiful autographs we have...the Blessing of Leo and the Praises of God.
 - **Leo visits the Poor Ladies often**, especially after Francis’ death, possibly helping Clare to scribe her letters to Agnes and her rule.
 - People from outside the monastery come to Clare with those in need of healing. A favorite of course is the little boy **Mattiolo**, age 4 or 5 with the pebble stuck up his nose...and Clare heals him making the sign of the cross over him.
- **It also explains why there are so many exceptions for those who are ill in their rules:**
 - In both of their rules, there should be such an environment of love that one should make their needs known, trusting that the brother or sister would care for them as a mother cares for a child.
 - Ordinarily the brothers would work with their hands for what they needed, but if necessary they could beg alms for those who were ill



- Ordinarily the sisters would fast basically from September through Easter, but if there was an ill sister, she was exempt, as were those laboring in the garden whose hunger might be greater.
- Ordinarily the Sisters would keep silence, but if there was a need, silence should be broken for the sake of the other!

OUR AGE OF MEDICAL ENLIGHTENMENT

In Spring, our Milwaukee Catholic Herald had two stories that provoke thoughts about our enlightenment in matters of health.

Madeline Kara Neumann

Madeline's story is unfortunately not unique but the horror of her death still pricks the consciences of those are convinced that only God is the great healer, and faith demands relying on a healing God. Madeline died at age 11 from ketoacidosis secondary to her diabetes which her parents chose not to have treated. For two years she declined, and ultimately succumbed to a death many believe was horrible. It was most tragic because the disease was totally manageable medically and she could not only have lived, but thrived living a normal life. According to her parents, who do not profess any particular faith, their beliefs come from the Judeo-Christian Bible which holds that healing comes from faith in God. Thus their focus was only there...and their daughter died.

Archbishop Dolan's niece Shannon

The second story was told by Archbishop Timothy Dolan who has a 17 year old niece Shannon who was diagnosed with bone cancer when she was 8. As the Archbishop shares, "Right after the diagnosis, a well-intentioned woman from the town...graciously approached [his sister, Shannon's mom] with expressions of concern. 'You have asked Jesus to heal Shannon, haven't you?' the neighbor inquired. 'We have,...and we are blessed with a fabulous doctor who specialized in pediatric oncology.' 'Wait a minute!' the neighbor protested. 'If you have entrusted Shannon to Jesus, you have the best doctor of all. Why are you hedging on your faith? You don't need doctors, hospitals, surgery, chemo. Just Pray! Don't you believe the Lord will answer your prayers for healing?'"

[His sister answered] 'Sure, I believe Our Lord will answer our prayers for Shanny's healing. I just believe that one of the ways he'll answer is through good doctors and treatment.'" The Archbishop called his sister a theologian.

Moral and Ethical Dilemmas – Insights

While these two stories are extreme or not so extreme, they point out the moral and ethical dilemmas facing us today at every turn:



- Signing forms to appoint Power of Attorney
- Seeking assurances that our own sacred humanity will not be lost amidst tubes, machines and experimental research.

Along with these challenges come powerful insights about **how our minds are capable of impacting our healing or our decline. Meditation, yoga, biofeedback, guided imagery, deep breathing or other spiritual exercises are being added to rehab protocols** because studies have proven that those who use these practices thrive for a longer period of time than those who don't. [*“Scientific proof of the changes in immune cells and the brain has been found in studies at the Center of Spirituality & Healing at the University of Minnesota.”* Mary Jo Kreitzer, Director] *March 9 Parade Magazine found in Baltimore MD.*

Today we have so many practices which blend **Eastern and Western medicine** at our disposal, not just to enhance medical intervention but also for relieving the symptoms associated with grieving or stress:

- Therapeutic counseling of all types
- Healing Touch and Reiki
- Acupuncture and Massage
- Aroma therapies and Hot Stone massages

CHALLENGES WE FACE

What are the greatest sources of our physical, psychic, and spiritual distress today?

- **Disease** is certainly something we all battle, either within ourselves or as we experience in relationship to others.
 - **How do we support** those who are dealing with **physical illness** and companion them as they face difficult decisions for intervention?
 - Think of Clare in the dormitory, surrounded by Sisters suffering from various maladies over the course of the forty years she lived there – It is clear they were sometimes hesitant to burden her with their difficulties. Once she became aware, her intervention included prayer of course, but also her touch, tracing the cross on their foreheads. Healing occurred in **her presence and her touch. How “in touch” are we with those who are ill? What barriers make this difficult? (HIPPA)**

Psychological Health

- As we grow in our understanding of **living the Evangelical Life and deepening our relationships with each other**, it has great impact on the psychological health of our communities and fraternities.



- Who or what **lifts our spirits?**
 - While we have many daunting questions to answer and strategic plans to put in place as our reality shifts over the next 20 years, **do we take serious time to play together?**
 - With whom do we have those **deeper conversations** that open up the opportunities to “make our needs known” or break open our own fears...to talk about what really matters?
- **Spiritual Health**
- We know that **pilgrimages to Assisi** have changed the spiritual lives of all of our pilgrims...they tell us these are life-long changes.
 - But what about our visits to our **nursing homes, care centers, hospitals**. Are these not pilgrimages of healing that impart graces on those we visit, but also upon ourselves as well? Because of the power of this kind of pilgrimage, **many of our congregations integrate this experience into the formative process of those entering the congregation? (Francis sent the novices down to live with the lepers.)**
 - Who do we consider to be a **“wisdom friend?”** Someone who is willing to be honest with us, and keep us on the right path? **How does our awareness of the cosmos, and all of earth’s creation inform us?**
 - We voice our desire to be more contemplative, and are clearer in our understanding that as Third Order Regular or Secular people, we are **“Active Contemplatives.”** We know that while there is a need to withdraw into solitude from time to time, [Our Franciscan heritage suggests that **we don’t go into solitude alone**, but with others] its purpose is not for ourselves alone, but rather it is to nurture us in order to return to our ministries in relationship.
 - **Maintaining a healthy prayer life is critical to our spiritual health**, and recognizing ourselves as pilgrims, opening our eyes to the graces before us each day, is a way to enhance prayer beyond the time set aside each day for this purpose.

CLOSING STORY OF A MIRACLE AT PADUA

My story of St. Anthony’s healing of an issue between my Mom and my brother John, a moment I will never forget. I had not known that Anthony resolved issues among family members. Whether we travel to a sacred shrine or places of healing closer to home, the presence of a Healing God surrounds us and often miracles do happen.

