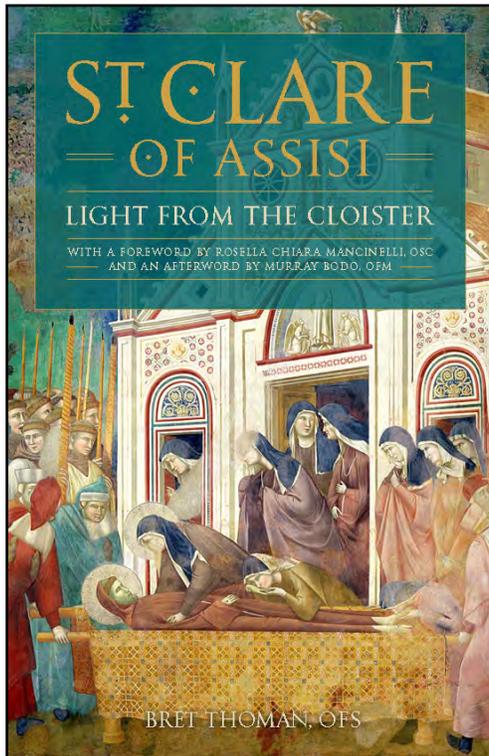


St. Clare of Assisi: Light From the Cloister

by Bret Thoman, OFS



“Bret Thoman, OFS’s new book on St. Clare is a lovely, simple and intelligent book on a lovely, simple and intelligent woman.” Tibor Kauser, OFS, Minister General of the Secular Franciscan Order

“What the historian cannot do, the writer, the poet, the man of letters can do ... This is what Bret Thoman does ... poetic, literary, even spiritual.” Marco Bartoli, Author of “Clare of Assisi”, Professor of Medieval History, Rome

“rich in historical context, wide in the hidden details of her life and deep in the unique spirituality of Clare. Thoman is a gifted Franciscan author who brings Clare to life in a way unprecedented in other Franciscan writings. This book is a treasure and, like his book on Saint Francis, will become a classic in the area of Franciscan studies ... this book is essential.” Sr. Ilia Delio, OSF, Villanova University

“Bret Thoman has a great gift for storytelling ... descriptive language that invites the reader into the scenes by his terrific style of narrative ... This book inspires!” Sr. Ramona Miller, OSF

“Bret Thoman’s new book on St. Clare is just great. I learned so much about the time and people. I feel he pulled together in a compelling way her life in one book, and captured and summarized St. Clare’s spirituality so well ... Great job!” Sr. Bernadette Marie Cappola, OSC

“Excellent! Rich! Beautifully written.” Sr. Kathy Warren, OSF

Endorsement

by Fr. Murray Bodo, OFM

St. Clare studies have grown beyond my imagining since 1979 when I wrote my first tentative words about St. Clare. Each book on her that came out delighted me, from textual studies to biography to this lovely new narrative Bret Thoman has given us. It is a story that incorporates discoveries from the deep well of Clarian research. This is a book that is accessible to anyone who loves a good story, an old-fashioned well-made story of a love driven by profound contemplation of the Poor Christ of the Gospel.

But the book does more than tell a story. It is an excellent compendium of sources for the life and spirituality of St. Clare and her sisters at San Damiano. It is a readable book that is filled with new and useful information about St. Clare, her milieu, and more particularly, the life and mores of Medieval Assisi, the Medieval Church, and Medieval society. And all of this is contained within a story that begins, as would an historical novel, with these enticing words:

Early in the morning at dawn, Ortulana was awoken when the first rays of light penetrated the narrow window of her towering castle in upper Assisi. The noblewoman arose and looked out the window to the east, the orient. The light was just beginning to break through the darkness of the night as the sun arose behind the mountain called Subasio. Her city, then known as Ascisi (“Ascending”), was home to a son who had just risen just ten

years earlier. His name was Francis. A daughter was about to rise. And her name would be "light." In time, the great son and daughter of Assisi would dispel the darkness of their city and illuminate lands far, far beyond.

That lovely opening paragraph not only gives the reader a sense of presence, of "being there," but the whole of the book foretold. The rest of the book will be an opening up of how that story unfolded, and the narrative keeps pace with whatever new information is given the reader. For example, Clare's family being a family of knights, when they return to their castle in Assisi after their exile in Perugia, a neighboring city, Thoman tells us this significant information:

As their first objective was defense, they re-built their fortified castle next to the cathedral. As knights, the men were well-versed in the art of warfare and military strategy and they knew how to use their weapons. They had to be ready for war, as another attack against them or Assisi could come without warning, so they trained frequently for battle in tournaments and jousts. They also sometimes joined the ranks of other allied cities when called upon to defend their territories, too.

Besides such concrete material as this, the whole narrative is interwoven with quotes from the first medieval life of Clare, called "The Legend" (meaning "to be read," because it was intended to be read aloud for the edification of the people who for the most part had no books of their own, or who could not read).

The Biblical "Song of Songs" is also quoted throughout, and Clare's own writings and the testimony of her own sisters and others are skillfully incorporated into the story to give the book heft and credibility. In addition, there is a plethora of endnotes that sort through controversies among scholars about certain facts, or that fill the reader in on matters best inserted into endnotes so as not to interrupt the flow of the narrative.

As the opening paragraph of the book implies, the story of Francis is very much a part of the story of Clare, and Thoman makes Francis's entrance into the story a natural development of where Clare's God-story is leading her. For example, when Clare heard Francis preach:

Clare was spellbound. She stood there in the cathedral enraptured as the words of Francis struck her to the core. She had never before heard anyone speak like him before. She had never heard such a sermon about the Incarnation and poverty in that way.

That night, Clare could not sleep as she lay in her bed. She could not stop thinking about Francis. There was something new and inspiring about him. His and the brothers' lives and actions corresponded perfectly to her thoughts about religion and faith. The way he was filled with the spirit was like a magnet and she felt drawn to him. Francis lived the Christian way of life that had been calling to her.

And from that beginning the whole incredible story of Clare becoming the first Franciscan woman unfolds in all of its beauty, its difficulties, its conflict with five different popes, and its ultimate confirmation of her and her sisters' way of living in Gospel poverty by Pope Innocent IV two days before she died.

Though St. Clare and her sisters were contemplatives who lived within the enclosure of the monastery of San Damiano, the story of their lives, their struggles and triumphs, is dramatic.

It is an inner journey, a Christian Romance as extraordinary as the Romance of the Quest of the Holy Grail, and at the same time as extraordinarily ordinary as the lives of Francis and his brothers who, like Christ's Knights-Errant on the road, did daring deeds as they preached and lived out, simply and daily, the Gospel of Jesus Christ.