

A SAINT WHO WOULD ONLY SETTLE FOR LESS



By **revdlucya** on 11/08/2026



There are saints who seem to have been born with halos already shining.

Clare of Assisi was rather different.

1194 saw her born into a wealthy and influential family in Assisi. The expectations for her were: a highly respectable marriage, a comfortable home, elevated social standing and a secure future.

That was not for Clare.

Aged eighteen, Clare heard Francis of Assisi preaching and decided that she wanted to follow Christ.

Not metaphorically. Not according to family tradition. Not fitted into 'normal' life.

It had to be her entire self – body, heart and soul.

On Palm Sunday 1212, Clare attended Mass in Assisi Cathedral. Later that night she slipped quietly out of her family home and out beyond the city walls.

This was an extraordinary act of courage. It was also, from the point of view of her family, probably not the ideal way to announce a change of vocation!

At the little church of Santa Maria degli Angeli, St Francis received her.

Her rich clothing was exchanged for a rough robe; her jewellery was removed; her long hair was cut off.

Clare had made her choice.

Eventually she became the leader of the Poor Clares. Their life was austere in a way that makes our modern attempts at “living simply” look embarrassing. They went barefoot, ate no meat, possessed no property and depended upon daily contributions.

They prayed, worked and lived in seclusion.

Clare was not looking for Christianity that was sustainable, achievable and compatible with a reasonable standard of living.

Which brings us rather awkwardly to the modern Church.

We are very good at making discipleship manageable.

We have courses, programmes, rotas, awaydays, PCC agendas, mission action plans, vision statements and, if all else fails, a powerpoint presentation.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with any of these things.

Churches need organisation.

Someone does have to arrange the flowers, unlock the church and discover why the photocopier has decided to communicate only in Norwegian.

But there is a danger that we can become very good at organising Christianity without actually allowing Christianity to reorganise us.

Clare would probably have found that rather puzzling.

For her, following Jesus was not an add-on to life.

It was life.

She was equally uncompromising when church authorities tried to persuade her to soften the community’s commitment to poverty. She was always willing to ask forgiveness, but never to tone down the Gospel.

We live in a culture of negotiated commitment.

Almost everything comes with an escape clause.

‘If you don’t like it you can return it.’

Clare’s attitude was always different.

Jesus said, “Follow me.”

So she did.

Clare's Christianity was not simply an exercise in deprivation.

Its centre was contemplation and a remarkable understanding of prayer.

Prayer is not simply when we present God with our shopping list of concerns.

Then wonder why heaven has not responded within the expected timeframe.

Prayer is allowing ourselves to be changed.

Clare did not avoid that; or retreat into private spirituality.

She became the leader of her community, defended its way of life, cared for the sick and washed the feet of her sisters. She was gentle, but she was not a pushover.

Clare trusted God when she had run out of options.

That is perhaps one of the hardest forms of faith.

It is relatively easy to trust God when the diary is empty, the bank account is healthy and everyone is behaving themselves.

It is rather more difficult when the spreadsheet has gone wrong, the building needs urgent repairs and the church treasurer has just sent an email beginning, "I think we need to have a conversation."

Clare understood something that we often forget: faith is not confidence that everything will go according to plan. It is confidence that God remains God when plans go awry.

The irony is that Clare eventually became enormously influential.

Popes, bishops and cardinals came to consult her, even though she herself rarely left San Damiano.

She gave up wealth, status and worldly influence — and acquired real authority.

Perhaps the Gospel has always worked rather like that.

We spend an extraordinary amount of energy trying to become important, only to discover that the people who really change things are often those who quietly become faithful.

And then, just to keep Clare's story from becoming too solemn, there is the matter of television.

In 1958 she was named patron saint of television. Tradition says that when she was too ill to attend Mass, she was able miraculously to see and hear it on the wall of her room.

One wonders what she would make of modern television.

After a lifetime of owning almost nothing, she might have found the average sitting room rather excessive: enormous screen, several remote controls and hundreds of channels, most of which appear to involve people buying houses they cannot afford.

Still, perhaps the connection is more profound than it first appears.

Clare understood that what we look at changes us.

And today, on her feast day, that leaves us with a question: What are we looking at?

What occupies our attention? What do we repeatedly return to? What shapes our hopes and fears? What fills the space in our minds when nobody is asking anything of us?

Clare looked towards Christ.

And she believed that if we look long enough, something begins to happen.

The image changes.

The person changes.

The light becomes visible.

Perhaps that is the challenge Clare leaves to the Church today.

Not that we should all abandon our homes, sell everything we own and run away to Assisi.

But perhaps we could ask whether we have made following Jesus just a little too manageable.

Have we turned discipleship into something we can fit neatly between coffee and lunch?

Have we polished the outward appearance while leaving the mirror itself untouched?

Have we become more concerned with keeping the institution going than with allowing Christ to transform us?

Clare reminds us that holiness is not about becoming impressive.

It is about becoming transparent.

About clearing away enough of ourselves for the light of Christ to be seen.

Perhaps that is our task too.

Not perfectly, of course.

But clearly enough for someone else to catch a glimpse of Christ.

So that, even in an age of PCCs, spreadsheets, leaking roofs and mysteriously malfunctioning photocopiers, Clare's way remains a good ambition for any Christian life.

With love and many blessings

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