The Cloistered Poor Clare Nuns
"Fixing her gaze upon Christ Jesus,
she wholly cleaves to the Lord."
(Verbi Sponsa)
Among the other favors which we have received and daily receive from our Benefactor, the Father of mercies, for which we ought to return the more thanks to that glorious Father, outstanding is our vocation.

Testament of Saint Clare
Rebuild My Church -

After the young Francis of Assisi had resolved to follow the way of the Poor Christ, but was tarrying awhile in the way of the world, he knelt one day before the icon crucifix in the small dilapidated church of San Damiano. As he prayed, he heard a voice from the crucifix: Francis, go rebuild my church, which as you see is falling into ruin. Francis started up immediately to collect money and materials, and began with his own hands to reconstruct the crumbling chapel.

San Damiano Crucifix
In hindsight, this work of rebuilding one small church by the impetuous Francis is seen as a misunderstanding of the Lord's much broader meaning. Francis was to be the founder of a vast and flourishing Order of poor, itinerant preachers of penance and peace, who would 'rebuild' the Church by their Gospel form of life. The Franciscan Order is the largest in the Church today, and God Himself promised Francis that it would endure to the end of time.

Yet hindsight here should not cloud the immediate meaning of the command from the crucifix, which Francis heard and obeyed. There is deep significance in the reconstruction work on the church of San Damiano. Francis knew it to be a true response to the words of the Crucified. He set about working, impelled by great joy, and uttered a prophecy which the Lord later fulfilled. As St. Clare herself would one day write: 'At that time, climbing up on top of the wall of that church, he called out in a loud voice to some poor people lingering nearby: Come and help me in the work of the monastery of St. Damian, for in this place
later on will be ladies by whose renowned and holy way of living our heavenly Father will be glorified throughout all His holy Church.’

Indeed the whole Church was to be “rebuilt” by the total gift of self which St. Clare and her followers would make to the Crucified Bridegroom by their hidden life of prayer and penance. When one belongs totally to Christ, all that she is and does becomes a channel of His unseen grace which flows out over the world and touches souls that can be touched in no other way. When one’s only mission is to belong totally to Christ, one rebuilds the Church. Burning like the lamps before the San Damiano crucifix, the cloistered Poor Clare nuns who had their beginnings in the little chapel

rebuilt by Francis, have never ceased to let the Light of Christ shine through their lives to give light to all in the House.
St. Clare

Clare was seventeen when she heard Francis preach penance and the love of God with such burning sincerity that those whose hearts were not likewise enkindled, promptly dubbed him mad. But Clare’s heart heard in the appeal of Francis the voice of the Holy Spirit, enlightening her to do penance and inviting her to be His. This young noblewoman, who was not only rich but sought after, saw what the world calls ‘everything’ as being too little. Her heart could not be filled with less than God. She would belong utterly to Him.

This desire in the heart of every contemplative is quite understandably misunderstood, even by many whose values are Christian. It requires a grace from God Himself not only to live the contemplative life, but even to understand it. St. Clare herself was opposed by relatives, suitors,
and friends in her decision to leave all. Yet many grasp by a kind of intuition the ‘usefulness’ of the Poor Clare nun, who does nothing at all that isn’t for God, and finds all her worth in being His own. Every day the faithful knocked at the door of San Damiano to ask prayers for their sick, their prodigals, their discouraged and despairing, their friends. Today it is the same. These people understand that the Poor Clares, cloistered from the world, are closer to its heartaches and miseries simply because they live hidden with Christ in God.

To understand the contemplative vocation is to know that its apostolate is universal and timeless. The Poor Clare has stepped apart from the world, not because she despises it, but because she wants to love it more purely - with that love of which the Lord Himself said there is no greater, and which He showed us on the Cross. It needs a great heart, a capacity for love so wide and deep that only God can fill it, a missionary zeal so ardent that no fewer than all the souls of the world can satisfy its thirst.

This was the thirst in the heart of Clare, when she left her home in secret at midnight after Palm Sunday in the year 1212. She went with one companion to the little church where St. Francis and his friars awaited her total gift. Dressed in her finest attire so as to cast aside her best, she knelt before Francis as he cut her long golden hair and garbed her in the rough brown
tunic and knotted rope-cord that would mark her Franciscan poverty. Her shorn head covered with a plain black veil, Clare pronounced her vows which bound her to God as His spouse forever.

Consecrated virginity partakes of the union between Christ and His Bride the Church. It is the positive, eager commitment of the whole self to a Divine Bridegroom. That is why the Church’s ancient ceremonial for the consecration of virgins, which is still used today, has for its climax the placing of a wedding ring on the finger of the newly-professed nun. ‘Receive this ring that marks your sacred marriage with Christ.’ She is wedded to God. A Poor Clare’s Divine Spouse has a Heart of infinite Love, and her own capacity for love will go on increasing as she grows in union with Him.

Basilica of St. Francis, Assisi, Italy
It is in contemplating the Face of the Crucified

The love which He asks is total, costing nothing less than everything.

This is what stirs in the heart of a young woman called to the cloister. That small insistence in the soul persists. Yet a vocation is a free gift from God. It is offered, not forced. God invites, but He does not compel. Discerning is a matter of patience and prayer, in the quiet assurance that an open heart that listens will hear His whispering.

It is God Himself who inspires in a young woman the desire to belong to the One who died for her love and whom she adores in the Blessed Sacrament. It is in contemplating the Face of the Crucified that every vocation comes to clarity, for only in this context can Love be found.
Formation

Postulancy

Applicants between the ages of eighteen and thirty may be received to enter the monastery and begin the Postulancy, the first stage of discernment and formation in the Poor Clare way of life. Experience has long shown that any woman of average strength, with good mental and emotional health can observe the Rule of St. Clare. A high school education is required, and freedom from debt. Postulants bring
with them a willing heart, a teachable mind, and a pliable character, for the act of responding to the contemplative vocation extends beyond the act of Entrance. During Postulancy, a young woman learns the tenor of the Poor Clare life, which demands an honest openness to personal change through prayer and penance, the flexibility necessary to be formed and grow spiritually, and the willingness to die to self for the sake of others, for love of Jesus.

You shall love the Lord your God With all your heart, With all your soul, With all your mind, With all your strength. (Luke 10:27)

The Poor Clare nun lives in a radical way this first and greatest commandment.
Novitiate -

A year after entering the monastery, the postulant may be received into the Novitiate. Her Clothing ceremony takes place after the manner of St. Clare's own example. A festive white gown is replaced by the simple religious garb of a Poor Clare nun, down to her feet which will be bare from this day on. The crowning glory of her hair is laid at the feet of her King as the beginning of her oblation. Every novice receives a new religious name, by which she will henceforth be known, and whose mystery becomes her own in a gradually deepening sense. Because a life of prayer and penance is a life which generates that joy and peace which the world cannot give or take away, the day that a postulant becomes a novice is a day of special rejoicing in the monastery.
The Noviceship of two years is a time of deeper evaluation and formation. Now the life of prayer and penance is embraced in fuller detail. The young Poor Clare novice, eager to give herself to God and to spend herself for souls, learns the enduring paradoxes of religious life: how freedom means letting go of her own will and choosing to obey Another’s; how poverty means she will always have something else to give to God; how her conversion must begin anew every day; how she must lose her life to find it; how the Spouse more fair than all the sons of men is the disfigured Man upon the cross. Noviceship is a time of preparation and expectation, of looking to the day when she may publicly proclaim these values to be her own by professing temporary vows, within the context of the sacrifice of the Mass.
First Profession

First Profession of vows is made for a period of three years. This is a time of continued discernment on the part of the community of the capacity of the newly professed sister to fulfill the obligations of the cloistered contemplative for the whole time of her life. In exchanging the white veil of the novice for the black veil of the professed nun, the young Poor Clare assumes her full responsibilities as a member of her Order: prayer, penance, fidelity. For embracing the hard and austere things that lead to God, the vows bring a marvelous strength. One is truly bound to Christ now by a mutual covenant of love to which He is unfailingly faithful. To the ordinary three vows of religion - poverty, chastity, and obedience - the cloistered Poor Clare adds a fourth vow to observe enclosure.
Some monasteries have extern sisters to whom is entrusted the outside business of the community and who are permitted to leave the monastery when it is necessary. These do not make the vow of enclosure although they are the special guardians of the cloister by the dedicated service they render, and they share fully in the life of the community. In most monasteries, however, the door and telephone are attended by cloistered nuns appointed for this task, and all other outside business is entrusted to the generous hands of willing friends. Thus the Poor Clare may observe her cherished vow of enclosure in its full vigor, knowing that she is only as effective as she is hidden.

To the vows of Obedience, Poverty and Chastity, the Poor Clare adds a vow to observe Enclosure.

The Poor Clare nun makes the radical choice of following Christ unto the folly of the cross, living with Christ His Passion for the salvation of others. This relationship with her Lord and Bridegroom is the only program of her life.
Solemn Vows -

Each of the stages of formation may be extended, but when all is ready the day comes for the Poor Clare to be consecrated to God by the irrevocable bond of Solemn Vows. With this act, she surrenders herself entirely to Him in a true holocaust whose consummation will be complete on the day of her death, when she finally sees her Bridegroom face to face. The ring she receives on her finger bears a

"More than conformed to Christ, she becomes Christ Himself."
-Pope John Paul II
Happy is she to whom it is given to cling with all her heart to Him
Whose beauty the heavenly hosts admire, Whose love inflames our love,
Whose contemplation is our refreshment, Whose graciousness is our joy,
Whose gentleness fills us to overflowing,
Whose glorious vision will be the happiness of all the citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem.

-St. Clare of Assisi

"Receive me, O Lord"
Life of Prayer

For many persons, the day ends when they retire at midnight. For Poor Clares the day begins when they rise at midnight to chant the first of the canonical hours of the Divine Office. This night vigil is a lamp held in the hands of the Poor Clare, while the mercy of the One with whom she keeps watch goes looking down the lanes of the world for the lost, the straying, the despairing, the suffering, the dying. To her priests and contemplative nuns the Church entrusts the Divine Office (or the Liturgy of the Hours) to be recited in Her name.

This official liturgical prayer of the Church is the voice of the Bride addressing her Bridegroom, joining the Voice of the Son addressing the Father.
This is the main work of the Poor Clare, who directs all her best creative energies toward participation in Holy Mass and the hours of the Divine Office throughout the day.

The schedule of a Poor Clare day is structured around the hours of the Divine Liturgy, with times for working, for reading and personal prayer, for taking her simple meals, for communal recreation, and for sleep. Because she is consecrated entirely to God, all these activities become a form of adoration. Indeed this is what gives a Poor Clare her deepest peace: she knows what God wishes her to do, moment by moment. By living in obedience, with fidelity and love, she enters wholeheartedly into His great Divine Plan with which all creation cooperates. Every moment of her life becomes a new proof of His love and His desire for her salvation and the salvation of all. ‘Happy are we, O Israel, for what pleases God is known to us.’ (Bar. 4:4)
Poverty

The material needs of a Poor Clare are simple and few, and for these she depends entirely upon Divine Providence. Like all the poor, she works and she considers work a grace, but she does not work for a living. St. Clare petitioned the Holy Father time after time for the ‘Privilege of Poverty’ which would distinguish her way from that of the self-supporting monastic enterprises of her day. She wished to have nothing at all but God, and this privilege was granted to her and to all her daughters. St. Clare’s faith was
rewarded one day by a Voice from the Blessed Sacrament promising her: "I will always take care of you." Down the centuries from that day to this, He has never failed to inspire in generous souls the eager desire to share their means with the cloistered Poor Clares, who pray that God may reward them as only He can: May you see fit, Lord, to bestow eternal life on all those who do good to us for Your sake.

The Cloistered Poor Clare Nun: Totally Given to God

Franciscan - Living the undying ideal of Francis and Clare of Assisi, who embraced the Poor Christ without reserve

Monastic - Choosing penance and praise as the means of dying to self and returning love for Love

Cloistered - Seeking God alone, hidden with Him in a place apart

Contemplative - Spreading the Kingdom of God by being transformed into her Crucified Spouse
“I will scatter my youth like petals before Your face.”

**Community**

The cloistered Poor Clare knows that souls depend upon her manner of living. ‘We are to the world what we are to each other’ is a maxim which every Poor Clare takes to heart in her efforts to excel in deep charity toward her sisters. The community life of nuns who have taken a vow of enclosure is an intense expression of the unity which only Christ can make possible in a torn and fragmented
world. The humility, the patience, the courtesy and peace which the Poor Clare strives to share in community are ripples in the Living Water which flow from the Heart of Jesus to touch all those who fear the demands of love, especially tragically in the family. The cloister places a weight of glory upon that new commandment which can be experienced as a burden in today's world: Love one another, as I have loved you.
Thus, the total gift of self to God as a cloistered Poor Clare nun is a lifelong challenge and an eternal joy. The assurance that is given by the Abbess whenever a Poor Clare pronounces her vows is in turn a surpassing gift which shows that God is not to be outdone in generosity: “I, on the part of Almighty God, promise you, if you observe these things, life everlasting.” The words of St. Clare find their place in the heart of all who are called to follow her way of life, and who yearn for no other way: Among the other favors which we have received and do daily receive from our Benefactor, the Father of mercies, for which we ought to return the more thanks to that glorious Father, outstanding is our vocation.

Through her unconditional love of Him, in the spirit of renunciation proposed by the Gospel, she accomplishes the sacrifice of all good things, “consecrating” every good thing to God alone.

(Verbi Sponsa)
For more information, write to:

Poor Clare Monastery  
of Mary, Mother of the Church  
2505 Stonehedge Drive  
Alexandria, Virginia 22306  
703-768-4918