

Mission Statement for the Companions of Clare

Summary of Purpose

Mission Statement: to create a group of contemplative seniors dedicated to God, following the Franciscan spirit and charism and whose work is prayer for the church and world. We will adhere to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church and follow the rules of Canon Law.

Overview

We wish to create a Roman Catholic community following the Primitive Rule of St. Clare, involving older women. The primary focus in the organization of our group will be women 62 or older who left religious life and wish to reenter, or those who wish to give the rest of their lives to God. However, we realize the Spirit may direct others to us, so we will be willing to accept other age brackets. Originally this concept was meant to fill a personal need. However, very few people stand alone so the concept of this community was developed to provide a venue for others.

Acknowledging the growth in understanding of religious life after the Vatican Council II and studies of the life and manner of Francis and Clare, a newly created community would be built accepting older women who would not normally be accepted in religious life due to their age.

Our community will be first and foremost a house of prayer for contemplatives. We will re-evaluate different ideas and practices current in existing religious communities, and incorporate good principles in our understanding and manner of living. We believe such a community would nourish the prayer life of the Church, the immediate surroundings and, at the same time, act as an answer to the call for vocations for which the Church has earnestly prayed.

Our community will follow the Rule of Clare of Assisi. This Rule, approved by Pope Innocent IV in 1253 is a proven, acceptable way of life for contemplatives. It is simple and straightforward and is built on the Rule of St. Francis of Assisi who wanted to live a radical following of the Gospel. Our group will understand the need for the contemplative life and will understand how it feeds the Church. Franciscans have always professed a counter-culture but maintaining this has been difficult. Our community will always keep this in our radar, since we believe it lies at the essence of the Francis' and Clare's understanding of the Gospel. While retaining our legal autonomy, we have been blessed by receiving sponsorship by the Friars of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus Province. Our agreement with them includes a Spiritual Guide, supplied by the Province, who will monitor our prayer life and practices to assure we are in keeping with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church and the Spirit of Francis and Clare.

Our research has determined the cutoff age for entrance into existing communities is generally 50 years of age. We believe the Spirit works in older individuals, as well.

Acceptance of retired women as a norm would set us apart from existing communities, would justify our request to build this community and fill a real need in the Franciscan Order and the Church.

Age brings about wisdom. Older women, who are called by God to live a radical existence and consecrate their lives in intensity of holiness, are stable, and have had a

wide variety of real life experiences. They are able to make an educated choice to answer God's call with a "fiat."

The Evangelical Counsels and our Commitment to Community Poverty

Very often life is spent 1/3 collecting treasures; the second 1/3 enjoying them; and the final 1/3 divesting oneself of all the "stuff." It is in the voluntary divesting of items, which helps to purify the soul so it is able to pursue the spiritual. The sacrifice of poverty (owning nothing) is apparent for older people, but when called by God, many have the courage to answer. We will provide the venue to live out the answer. Our poverty will be understood and practiced as the evangelical counsel and the Rule of Clare dictates.

Chastity

We will accept widows as well as non-married women. Our consecration is not built on our past but on the desire to live and belong to the Lord Jesus only. Our practice of chastity will be based on the concept of the evangelical counsel knowing God alone is our soul mate and spouse.

Obedience

Our obedience will be understood and practiced as the evangelical counsel demands. We will have a leader who, open to prayer and advice, will help all understand what is for the communal good both spiritually and materially. The leader will have courage, holiness and a strong understanding of our way of life. She will have ears to listen to the voice of God as well as the voice of the sisters. After hearing all and praying intensely, decisions will be made with certainty.

We will make certain that a complete understanding of the Evangelical counsels are understood during the candidates formative time within the community.

Simplicity of Life

None of what we do is a guarantee to holiness, but we believe the externals serve as a reminder of the mysticism to which we aspire. Any rule, practice or work is always first subject to the teachings of the Gospel, particularly charity, compassion and common sense. Our community would reflect these ideals. Our desire to follow the Gospel would be an intense study and witness to the Sermon on the Mount.

Sacrifice is an essential part of the contemplative lifestyle. Candidates who appear unhappy, troubled or not content with their existing life will not be accepted. Entering the Companions of Clare is the act of saying goodbye to a rich and satisfying lifestyle for a more intimate relationship with God. There is no room in the Franciscan spirit of joy for “good riddance to my life”.

Community Life

Insights given to mature, stable women and the desire to serve God in prayer constitute a great part of the mystery of vocation. However, with these insights come independence and personal convictions that can be difficult to amalgamate into a cohesive life. We will deal with these issues. The dynamics of community will involve strong women whose every encounter will be tempered with kindness and understanding. This is our commitment when we band together. This is the essence of community living and it is how we choose to witness to the life of the Trinity.

Consideration of the Mystery of Vocation and Screening

We will make every effort to support and encourage the vocation mystery in each person who inquires. We know screening potential candidates will be imperative. While everyone is called to contemplative prayer not everyone can live a contemplative lifestyle. The Companions of Clare choose to live a marginal lifestyle and this reality creates a partial, natural screening process. Discernment involves the nurturing of the vocation mystery, and careful and prayerful discretion in dealing with the fragility of each person’s spirit. Our interviews before acceptance into the Companions of Clare will be tempered with honesty, compassion and kindness.

The path of living in community, and giving your life completely to community while following the Franciscan and Clarian interpretation of the Gospel is not an easy one and we give the Holy Spirit the task of enlightening us so few mistakes are made. We wish to push the limits of age acceptance so older women can partake of the blessings of religious life. The work of the Spirit and our prayers will bring about the union of Christ, community and the applicant.

Objective

We are neither a nursing home nor a retirement community. We are rather a God-centered, Franciscan motivated group whose basic expression is engagement and attendance in the Roman Catholic Liturgy and praying the Divine Office in common. We expect complete understanding and full participation in these activities. We will provide classes in both to assure our members are clear on the teachings and accepted understandings of the Roman Catholic Church.

Sustainability, Income, Work

We will also expect each sister to contribute something in the form of work. Realizing the talents we each have, and developing simple, new skills will provide income and personal fulfillment. Working in manual labor is a discipline long proven by contemplatives. Also each person will be expected to perform some sort of household maintenance.

The sisters will be expected to pool their Social Security for the common good. Pooled resources would alleviate financial concerns of the sisters. Respecting Lady Poverty, any other passive income, pensions or annuities will be pooled resources after the candidate has completed the formation process.

We also envision, in time, creating one or two hermitage/poustinas to rent out to outsiders wanting an ascetical experience. A simple, one room cabin, would be completely separate from our convent. We would supply food but hermit residents would not otherwise engage the sisters. The occupants would be invited to Liturgy and Office. But other than that, no contact would be allowed. Our privacy is an intimate part of the contemplative life. Our hermitage hospitality would be limited and extended stays (up to a week) would be planned out so no interference with our community would occur. No one would be allowed an indefinite stay.

Formation

We have been blessed by receiving DVDs and CDs of scripture and other courses taught at seminaries and/or published and sold on the open market. These tapes are current and will stimulate our minds and spiritual life. They range, so far in subjects such as Christology, psalms, contemplative prayer and Eucharist. Courses will keep us from becoming stagnant in our approach to the teachings of the Church. Over the years we have and will continue to increase the size of our library with classic and new spiritual books. Every opportunity for ongoing formation will be afforded our sisters. We understand the need for a Formation Syllabus ready to be used, and at present we are working with several models. Since we are a new, emerging organization details for this formation will be tested, keeping the best, weaning out what doesn't work. Basics of Franciscan spirituality, the evangelical counsels, our Rule and Manner of Living will always be included in our formation syllabus. We will also be searching for collaborative formation classes and on-line resources with other Franciscan contemplative communities.

Prayer and Community

Our principle work and expression of community will be Liturgy in the Roman Catholic Rite and praying the Divine Office. Other engagements of community would be somewhat limited. Silence, time and personal space are keys to contemplative living. Older, professional women understand this and are content living quiet lives. They also know the necessity to honor the space and quiet of others.

External signs of Consecration

Sacramentals are visible signs of grace and have long been accepted by the Church as signs of Christ's presence. Our sisters will wear a Franciscan habit to remind them of the steps they have taken to belong to God.

Enclosure

We will keep some semblance of enclosure as closely as possible. Challenges in this day and age and our limited number of sisters will make it difficult to maintain an cloister but with careful planning and the introduction of our Martha/Mary plan we believe it will be possible. To this end we envision property large enough to become a natural cloister so external stops won't be necessary.

As women living a marginal lifestyle, our property will be a sacred space for us to pray and reflect on the wonders of God. A Martha/Mary schedule, as proposed by Francis in his Rule for Hermits will be put in place. Schedules would be made rotating the sisters to allow for each sister to participate in the convent silence without burdening one sister to act as extern. Alternating Marthas will also help us to determine the skills of each sister.

Conclusion

It is apparent the Spirit is breathing new life in religious commitment. Our measure for success is in the quality of dedication each sister displays, not in numbers who join. We anticipate a limit of 10 sisters. As stated above, contemplative lifestyle is marginal. Those called to the Companions of Clare will find, develop and participate in a new kind of home.