

Mission Statement for the Companions of Clare

Mission Statement: to create a group of Franciscan-spirited seniors whose work is prayer for the church.

Overview

Companions of Clare (CoC)

Concept

We wish to create an experimental community following the Primitive Rule of St. Clare, involving older women. 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 know the Spirit sometimes calls women of a different age bracket. We would be open to those women as well. Originally this concept was meant to fill a personal need. However, very few people stand alone so this paper has been developed as an invitation for others. 1963-1980 were difficult years for religious life. Wonderful changes came about after the Council, but some valuable practices were set aside in our attempt to conform and understand the principles of Vatican II. Some women religious were able to weather the brewing storm of change and some, like me, lost focus. The equation of loss of focus and vocation questions became synonymous, and many good women left religious life. I have come to believe vocation is deep and everlasting in one's soul. In preparing this overview I have rediscovered the essence of my own calling and realized the possibility of facilitating the vocational discernment of others.

Acknowledging the growth in understanding of religious life as time went on after the Council 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. Seniors, 62 and older, called by God, is our focus group, although no woman of any age would be refused entrance due to age. Our community will be first and foremost a house of prayer for contemplatives. If approved, we would 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 surrounding and, at the same time, act as an answer to the call for vocations for which the Church has earnestly prayed.

The vigor and enthusiasm of youth can wane as time goes. Older women, who are called to religious life are stable, feel no need for experimentation and yet, in the spirit of Francis, are open to a creative vision.

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 straight forward 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 a 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.

Our research has determined the cutoff age for entrance into existing communities is 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 and a realization of the transitory reality of life. 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.

Asceticism

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 in a radical way would be an intense study and witness to the Sermon on the Mount.

Sacrifice is an essential part of the contemplative and penitential lifestyle. Candidates who appear unhappy, troubled or not content with their existing life will not be accepted. Entering our community is the act of saying goodbye to a rich and satisfying lifestyle which cleanses the soul and deepens the journey to holiness. 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 part of the mystery of vocation. However, with these insights come independence and personal convictions which can be difficult to amalgamate into a cohesive life. Our group will deal with issues of this nature and other senior realities which may occur. 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. Our lifestyle is marginal and this reality creates a partial, natural screening process. So we see two sides to discernment. One is the nurturing of the vocation mystery, the other 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 compassion and kindness.

Advanced age brings about maturity, which when shared, is a gift and blessing for all. The image of marriage between Jesus and a contemplative is not a chance one. The “perfect fit” for individual and community is also a marriage. This path of living in community, and giving your life completely to community while following the radical interpretation of the Gospel is not an easy one and we can only give the Spirit the task of enlightening us so few mistakes are made. It can and has been done. We wish to push the limits of age acceptance so older women can partake of this mystical marriage. The work of the Spirit and our prayers will bring about the union of Christ, community and the applicant. This is the precursor of mysticism. This indeed is a mystical marriage.

We want to state here we are neither a nursing home nor a retirement community. We are rather a God-centered, Franciscan spirited group whose basic expression and engagement of community is in 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 to be shared by all, whether it be community living duties, or work in the form of an artistic nature to be sold in our religious gallery. This will help us remain sustainable.

Most of the towns in rural New Hampshire are poor and strapped for money. The concept of “mendicants” is difficult for the town residents to understand. Yankees are famous for their ingenuity and hard work. They will expect to see some measure of work preformed by the sisters. With that in mind, all sisters will be expected to produce something with their hands. This is a discipline as well as a means to supplement our income. We currently have an established clientele who come to purchase high end religious items in a small religious gallery. Attached to the gallery is a little chapel where visitors can pray and recover from daily stresses. The gallery reflects the quiet and holiness we hope to achieve. It also acts as a spring board for spiritual conversations.

The sisters will be expected to pool their Social Security for the common good. Pooled resources would alleviate financial concerns of the sisters. Lady Poverty is of prime importance in the Franciscan way of life. We will make do with what we have.

We also envision, in time, creating one or two hermitage/poustinas to rent out to outsiders wanting an ascetic experience. A simple, one room cabin, would be completely separate from our convent. We would supply food but

hermit residents would not 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.

An Approach to Temporary Vocation

It may happen a woman needs time to reflect and consider life in the context of an extended retreat. Under special circumstances, we would allow a senior to come one year for study, to pray and experience contemplation. During this time the woman would pray and study alone or in community. We would have a syllabus ready or she could form her own course of studies. After a year she would be required to leave. If she decides to join us in the capacity of member, after a two month hiatus, she could apply for entrance. This year of study is not a rehabilitation time or a chance to emote. The core community is not trained for counseling, nor do we wish to engage in that ministry. Rather, we would offer a venue for a year's retreat in prayer, study and privacy. This would be offered once per person.

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, 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, experimental community, 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 communities who have similar lifestyles.

Prayer and Community

Our principal 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. The habit would be first and foremost a sign one sister to another. It acts as an encouragement to continue to be dedicated women of God. It will also mark us to outsiders indicating we are walking in the specific path of Francis and Clare. There will be little to explain to the laity. The habit will speak for itself and it will speak for us. Our presence in full habit will be a visible witness of God's graceful attendance on earth.

Most professional women have an abundance of clothing. A Franciscan habit will also act as a simplifier and common denominator for all concerned.

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 enclosure 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. To assist us in our enclosure we will initiate a Martha/Mary schedule, as proposed by Francis in his Rule for Hermits. Schedules would be made rotating the sisters to allow for each sister to participate in the monastery enclosure without burdening one sister to act as extern. Alternating Marthas will also help us to determine the skills of each sister.

Housing

Our housing should be large enough to accommodate as many sisters as God sends. We don't anticipate a large community and we do not want a house so large as to be a constant burden for maintenance. The current house being used can hold three sisters. We anticipate no more than eight sisters. Any house used would need one room designated as a parlor for visitors and a special room for the chapel. Beyond the parlor and chapel, the house would be considered enclosure and not open to the public. The chapel will be open to visitors only during Liturgy and Divine Office. Other than those times, the chapel is closed to visitors unless there is a special need. This will allow our sisters to use the chapel for their private devotions without the distractions of outsiders.

Invitation

This would definitely be an experimental community. Appropriate literature has been developed and we now have a website so knowledge of our contemplative house of prayer is available.

We have accepted several invitations to speak on behalf of the community and will continue to do so as a means of becoming established. Invitations to become involved are important, but we are subject to God's work in a person's soul. Here again the mystery of vocation comes into play. Anyone interested in being a part of our group would have a chance to investigate via e-mails, telephone calls, and interviews. They would learn what is expected before any person is accepted as a community member.

We would disclose the conditions of our life in writing prior to the admissions process. We currently have a preliminary questionnaire posted on the web. Numbers of women will not count in this experiment; what will count is the quality of commitment to this marginal, ascetic, consecrated life. Women applying must have some pioneer spirit.

Measure of Success

I believe this grassroots diocesan initiative connected to the friars is of the Spirit. My prayer and reading have confirmed my instincts as inspiration. This endeavor has not been taken on lightly.

The measure of success is not the number of bodies who will join us. That is in the hands of God. I am certain there are women behind me who will want to join, although their faces are hidden. I firmly believe the Franciscans have a place for any type of experimental group. History has proven this. A special convent for delayed vocations is a valid concept and is desperately needed. This appears to be understood by the Church since it now allows for delayed vocations/ordinations to the priesthood. The challenges are unique, but with prayer and faith, this community will flourish.

For those who love life, the opportunity to say goodbye to what they worked for and thought they wanted will be given them. Their lives will be rewarded with a deep, profound joy. By embracing the farewell, they embrace Jesus. Our offer of sacrifice becomes real and effective by our farewell to a comfortable life and movement into our identification with the anawim. To give this opportunity to seniors, who understand the fragility of the human condition, and who wish to pursue the mystical reality of God is the special legacy Francis and Clare. There is room in the Order Francis founded for anyone who wants to join.

Perfect Joy

I have thought and prayed about this for many years. My initial search was to find a path wherein I could enter religious life again. The path widened as the process developed. God has blessed me with a sense of the "holy" and a

will to bring to fruition this dream. This is far beyond any mission I have undertaken in the past, but it has made me keenly aware of the fact this is what I have been working toward in my life. "God often reveals to the least that which is best to be done". And, in His infinite mercy, the possibility of again giving my life to the Lord under the guidance of Francis and Clare is a gift beyond all telling. To create a place for others to do the same is "far beyond anything we could ask or imagine". I submit this plan with good women behind me waiting, watching and praying for acceptance. I have yet to meet and talk with them but I feel their presence

In his attempt to give back to God all he had, Francis stripped himself of his material inheritance. It was a huge risk but once done, he didn't look back. I, on my part, am attempting to give back to God all He has given me. By opening the current house and acreage to others in the context of a religious community, I have divested myself of possessions. It is a huge risk for me. But I believe this to be an inspired and of the Holy Spirit. When I was younger, the gift of my life to the Poor Clare community was a sacrifice made primarily by my parents. Now the gift is from me.

I submit this concept paper as an explanation of my dream and vision. To be a public witness to God in a community which has watched my development as a person both materially and spiritually will be returning a new type of gift to them.

It is my fervent hope the story of Perfect Joy remains in the writings of Francis and not reality for me or any other older woman. I ask you for advice and input to assure both me and anyone who follows that we are walking in the footsteps of the Lord as taught by Francis and Clare.

Peace and every good!

Respectfully and humbly submitted:

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