



St. Clare (1194-1253) became an exemplar for medieval women through her commitments to follow the Holy Spirit, live the teachings of St. Francis, and abandon every wish for temporal things. Through her remarkable service to others, she drew closer to God.

Leah Rene Gregoire. THE DEATH OF ST. CLARE, 2004. Intaglio. (Responding to the Master of Heiligenkreuz, THE DEATH OF ST. CLARE, c.1400. Oil on panel. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.) Photo: used by permission of the artist.

Surrounded by Witnesses

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

When the eighteen-year-old Clare heard the Lenten sermons of Francis of Assisi, she begged him to allow her to live “after the manner of the holy Gospel.” During mass at the cathedral on Palm Sunday, when others moved toward the altar rail to receive a branch of palm, she stayed in her place as if in a dream. That evening Clare secretly left her father’s home and went to Francis, who placed her with the Benedictine nuns in a nearby village. When her father tried to take her home, she and a younger sister fled to the chapel of San Damiano and formed the first community of the Order of the Poor Ladies, or Poor Clares, as the second order of St. Francis came to be known.¹

Leah Gregoire’s *The Death of St. Clare* interprets an early fifteenth-century oil painting by the Austrian artist known as the Master of Heiligenkreuz.² In that painting the death scene is a vision by St. Benevenuta, one of Clare’s followers. Clare lies in a bed surrounded by women who are witnesses to Clare’s selfless life: the Virgin Mary, virgin martyrs, and several Poor Clares.

Gregoire’s interpretation replaces several of the virgin martyrs with their iconographic symbols. The wheel symbolizes St. Catherine of Alexandria, whom the Emperor Maximinus had condemned to die on a wheel before it disintegrated at her touch. The lamb indicates the presence of St. Agnes of Rome, for each year two lambs are blessed at her church in Rome and their wool is woven into palliums, or bands, that the pope confers on new archbishops. The dragon of St. Margaret of Antioch is at the foot of the bed, for she had met the devil in the form of a dragon. A distant tower represents St. Barbara, who was locked in a tower by her pagan father because of her beliefs in Christ.

NOTES

1 For background, see Paschal Robinson, “St. Clare of Assisi,” and Edwin V. O’Hara, “Poor Clares,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia* online (www.newadvent.org/cathen/).

2 An illustration of this fifteenth-century masterwork, which hangs in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, is online at www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pinfo?Object=41425+0+none. Gregoire’s work appears in *Silver*, a collection of twenty-five contemporary artists’ interpretations of Old Master works of art organized by Christians in the Visual Arts (CIVA), online at www.civa.org/exhibitions.php?subID=78. We thank Ms. Gregoire for permission to reproduce *The Death of St. Clare* and for her gracious assistance in the research for this article.