



# Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

December 27, 2023

Dear Friends,

“THE Eucharist is at the root of every form of holiness, and each of us is called to the fullness of life in the Holy Spirit. How many saints have advanced along the way of perfection thanks to their eucharistic devotion!... Holiness has always found its center in the sacrament of the Eucharist,” wrote Pope Benedict XVI in the Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis* of February 27, 2007 (no. 94). The life of Mother Clara de Soria, a 20th-century Poor Clare who was declared Venerable by Pope Francis on April 3, 2014, bears witness to this fact.

Clara de Soria Sánchez García was born on February 14, 1902 in Torre Cameros, in the province of Logroño (Spain), the third of the seven children born to Leopoldo Sánchez, who was a teacher, and his wife, Agustina García. She was baptized Juana de la Concepción. From before her birth, her mother had dedicated her to St Pascal Baylon (1540-1592), a humble Franciscan friar who drew his strength from the Eucharist and spent long hours in silent adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. Shortly after her birth, the family moved to Rollamento, and then to Rebollar, in the province of Soria. Juana grew up in a deeply Christian family, and her forceful and spirited character, coupled with a generous heart, endeared her to all. When she was just nine years old, she began teaching her younger siblings their catechism. She composed a little prayer on the day of one of the boys' First Communion, asking for a vocation to the priesthood in his name: “Pascualito (that was his first name), wouldn't you like to become a priest? You would celebrate Holy Mass and give us Communion.” She urged her family and friends to make sacrifices. At home, she took on various household tasks. According to her sister, Juana would always choose the toughest jobs, leaving her the lightest ones.

But even at this early age, the little girl showed a marked inclination for solitude, and she frequently spent time in prayer. Whenever she could, she would slip away to visit the Blessed Sacrament, always remaining there as long as possible. She loved going to Mass because that is where Christ offers Himself up in sacrifice for love of us, and gives Himself to us as our spiritual food and drink. At the time, it was



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Venerable Clara de Soria  
(1902-1973)

impossible to receive Holy Communion every day, but Juana had a deep desire to be united with Christ, so she asked her mother: “Tell the parish priest to raise the Host higher and longer at Mass, so that I can make a good spiritual communion.” From an early age, her mother taught her to be mindful of the poor: Juana's generosity knew no bounds. Her family would offer a meal to the local poor on certain special feast days, and the young girl would remain with them for a long time, serving them, even if that meant going without her favorite dessert.

Despite being endowed with an intelligence that was both bright and profound, she had no desire to continue her studies any longer, because the contemplative religious life was what she felt called to. For as long as she could remember, she had been aware of this calling from God to become a nun. She later recalled: “I had heard that there were nuns who were cloistered in their convent and who praised God without ceasing, and I said to myself: I will be a nun like them.” The Word of God kindled in her a fire that she could not repress, and which drove her to exclaim at every moment: *Behold, I come to do your will, O God* (Heb 10:7). As she herself put it, she wanted to become a very “worship of the glory of God.” But her parents, good Christians though they were, failed to understand her and enrolled her in the teacher training college in Soria. Juana obeyed, but she felt out of place in the somewhat superficial and turbulent student world: her soul yearned for the house of the Lord. Nevertheless, she was always ready to be of service to her fellow students in every way. She was doing brilliantly in her studies, but suffered greatly from not being able to fulfill her

heart's desire. In February 1922, unable to bear the situation any longer, she wrote a deeply moving letter to her elder brother who had already started to teach: "I cannot study any longer; my vocation is to be a nun, and I must respond to this call from the Lord." Her brother was extremely upset and passed the letter on to his parents, who at last, and not without reluctance, accepted their daughter's vocation. Before long, however, they genuinely rejoiced to think that they would have a nun for a daughter. But then, on the very day chosen for her admission to the convent, her father died suddenly of a cerebral embolism. Juana was well aware of the difficulties faced by her widowed mother and her younger siblings, the two older ones being already married. But she also understood that she had to obey to God who was calling her, and that her obedience would be a source of grace for her family. She entered the convent of the Poor Clares of Soria on August 15, 1922. The Order of Poor Clares, founded in Assisi in 1211 by St Francis and St Clare, had been established in Spain in 1223. "To enter a convent," she would later tell her novices, "is to die to the world, and to die you have to go through agony. The agonies we go through are real agonies, but the joys we experience afterwards make the sufferings of the past feel very small."

### *The solitude of JESUS*

THE community that Juana joined consisted of sixteen nuns. Another postulant soon arrived. The mistress of novices was a good and simple sister, filled with the Franciscan spirit; at first, however, she had difficulty understanding Juana, who suffered greatly as a result. In February 1923, the convent's triennial chapter took place; the mistress of novices and the abbess swapped roles. Mother Gregoria Purroy, the new mistress of novices, was deeply spiritual and also intelligent, discerning and refined, but she too failed to perceive the depth of Juana's interior life. On February 18, 1923, Juana received the Franciscan habit together with her religious name: Sister Clara de la Concepción. Her great devotion to the Lord in the Tabernacle and the Child in the Crib developed and materialized in poems. To her great regret, the Rule followed by the community was not the primitive Rule of St Clare, which forbade all possessions, but a softened Rule approved by Pope Urban IV. "I was walking one day during recreation with my Mother Mistress and when I asked her about this second Rule, I discovered its meaning very clearly. What should I do? I asked the Lord and I found the solution: to observe well the Rule I had found here, and to ask Heaven constantly, with absolute confidence, that the Community would come to profess the original Rule." She also felt great sorrow at the fact that JESUS in the Blessed Sacrament was often alone, apart from the time of Mass and the Divine Office.

In February 1924, Sister Clara was admitted to make her temporary profession, but she remained in the novitiate, where her good humor brought much cheer. In 1925, two

other young postulants presented themselves. This made her very happy because of her unquenchable thirst to see souls consecrate themselves to God. It was she who introduced them to the life of a Poor Clare, sharing with them her desire for perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and a return to the original Rule. Three years later, in 1927, aged twenty-five, she pronounced her perpetual vows. This marked the beginning of a long period of spiritual trial in the form of unutterable sadness, aridity, repugnance and a profound bitterness of spirit. She sought in Sacred Scripture the light that had ceased to illuminate her soul. Her spirit of faith allowed her to act with fidelity, as if nothing were wrong, maintaining her trust, hoping against hope (cf. Rom 4:18) in the One she had chosen to serve. She still radiated joy and showed herself to be obliging, silent and obedient. Her health, which had been a little weak during the novitiate, had by now become robust. Some time previously, she had been entrusted with the responsibility of assisting the bursar; she fulfilled this role with zeal, showing a great spirit of sacrifice. In 1933, she was appointed portress, that is, in charge of welcoming people at the monastery gates; she held this position until she became abbess in 1941.

### *"With Him, I offer myself!"*

THE Holy Mass was the center and summit of her life. In union with the priest, she offered the divine Victim for the salvation of the whole world, while also offering herself: "Father, I offer JESUS to you; with Him I offer myself, O my God."

In his encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, Pope John Paul II later wrote: "When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, the memorial of her Lord's death and resurrection, this central event of salvation becomes really present and 'the work of our redemption is carried out'. This sacrifice is so decisive for the salvation of the human race that JESUS CHRIST offered it and returned to the Father only *after he had left us a means of sharing in it* as if we had been present there. Each member of the faithful can thus take part in it and inexhaustibly gain its fruits. This is the faith from which generations of Christians down the ages have lived. The Church's Magisterium has constantly reaffirmed this faith with joyful gratitude for its inestimable gift. I wish once more to recall this truth and to join you, my dear brothers and sisters, in adoration before this mystery: a great mystery, a mystery of mercy. What more could JESUS have done for us? Truly, in the Eucharist, he shows us a love which goes 'to the end' (cf. Jn 13:1), a love which knows no measure" (April 17, 2003, no. 11).

Sister Clara's desire to see the Lord adored by the whole world grew stronger by the day. *As the deer longs for streams of water* (cf. Ps 41:2), her soul sought the face of God. She later recalled: "One day in 1936, while in the stalls, I understood that the Lord wanted the Blessed Sacrament to be exposed permanently in this church, and that I should tell Father Julius (her director of conscience)... As we were at

war (the civil and religious war of 1936-1939) and the Father was in the other zone, I was unable to make this communication, so I left the matter to JESUS... After some time, the Father came to Soria and I told him all. His reply was: 'God wills it!'" The prospect was received with enthusiasm by the young sisters of the convent. In 1938, Sister Clara spoke about it to the community. Her abbess was in favor, but there was strong resistance among the older nuns, who saw it as too heavy a burden. The plan was postponed "for peace's sake."

During the Chapter of 1938, Sister Clara was asked by the community to be its abbess. She was thirty-six years old; according to the law, you had to be forty to hold this position. Out of humility, she refused to accept the abbacy or any other office. But she suffered deeply and shed bitter tears, echoing the words of the psalmist: *My tears have been my bread day and night* (Ps 41:4), because she felt guilty, through her refusal, of having delayed the introduction of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Three years passed and, in 1941, Sister Clara, who was not yet forty, was elected abbess. The dispensation of age requested from Rome was granted, and Mother Clara was installed as abbess on June 11. As a result of the recent civil war, the cost of living had risen considerably: the new abbess suffered from not being able to feed her nuns as well as she would have liked, but she put her trust in Divine Providence, increased her prayers to the saints and made considerable efforts to improve the situation. On the eve of certain feasts, the sisters would pray during recreation to ask for food for the following day, and they would see everything arrive, including dessert. "Divine Providence never fails," Mother Clara later wrote.

### *Intense joy*

IN November of that year, after the community retreat, perpetual adoration was established, with the nuns taking turns before the tabernacle day and night. In 1942, the Holy See approved new Constitutions for the Poor Clares, that provided for permanent exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. The Sisters' joy was intense. On August 11, on the eve of the solemnity of St Clare, a priest exposed the Lord in the monstrance for perpetual adoration.

"In the Eucharist, the Son of God comes to meet us and desires to become one with us; eucharistic adoration is simply the natural consequence of the eucharistic celebration, which is itself the Church's supreme act of adoration. Receiving the Eucharist means adoring him whom we receive... The act of adoration outside Mass prolongs and intensifies all that takes place during the liturgical celebration itself," wrote Pope Benedict XVI in *Sacramentum caritatis*. He added: "And it is precisely this personal encounter with the Lord that then strengthens the social mission contained in the Eucharist, which seeks to break down not only the walls that separate the Lord and ourselves, but also and especially the walls that separate us from one another... Here I would like

to express appreciation and support for all those Institutes of Consecrated Life whose members dedicate a significant amount of time to eucharistic adoration. In this way they give us an example of lives shaped by the Lord's real presence" (nos. 66-67).

In a supreme paradox, JESUS in the Blessed Sacrament was at once Mother Clara's joy and her martyrdom. Her heart burned with the fire of love for the Eucharist. She said: "We must be like seraphim for love; we must burn with love for the Eucharist!" But it was this love that also caused her martyrdom: even the slightest and most remote suspicion that the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament might be suppressed inflicted her with the deepest of sufferings.

Her great devotion to the Blessed Virgin, which inspired her to recite the entire Rosary every day, also led her in 1945 to proclaim MARY perpetual abbess of the monastery in the mystery of her Immaculate Conception. Thus did she address her: "Dear Mother, accept the task of governing the Community which God our Lord has entrusted to me and which, with the greatest pleasure of my soul, I bestow upon you today... You are the divine shepherdess who will guide this little flock to lead it to JESUS. We, the elected and canonically appointed abbesses, constitute ourselves as your humble little shepherdesses."

### *Making God's gifts bear fruit*

MOTHER Clara was always there for all the Sisters; every one of them could speak to her with the confidence of a daughter and the familiarity of a sister. Like no other, she was aware of her Sisters' shortcomings, but she did not dwell on them; instead, she focused on their qualities and supported them: "We must canalize the Sisters' abilities by placing them in positions and functions that can best develop them," she said. "We may squander nothing; everything is a gift from God... We must make this gift bear fruit." Above all, she worked at promoting the spiritual growth of the community, organizing training sessions for them. An assiduous reader of Sacred Scripture and its most authoritative commentators, she shared the treasures she had accumulated through her teaching at chapters and conferences.

Having accomplished many steps in this direction, the community of Soria asked the Holy See for official passage to the first Rule through the intermediary of its bishop. This would allow the Poor Clares to live without any other income than that earned by the labor of their own hands and spontaneous almsgiving. Pope Pius XII's rescript granting their request arrived on May 22, 1953 and was received with great joy by the Sisters. In a mysterious way, each time the Lord granted a grace to Mother Clara, this grace was preceded by a painful trial, which she strove to endure with joy and generosity.



Drawn by the light of JESUS in the Blessed Sacrament, many young postulants asked to be admitted to the monastery, with the result that by 1956 the number of nuns had risen to over forty. But Mother Clara's dreams were for a community of fifty members and, with confident faith, she placed fifty pebbles near the tabernacle so that the Lord, through his creative power, would transform them into nuns. The dream became a reality: under Mother Clara's abbatiage, the community grew to fifty-seven members. Little by little, thanks to the diversity of their skills, their work became more organized, and the financial difficulties of the beginning of the abbatiage began to fade away. A small farm was set up under the efficient and disinterested management of a veterinary surgeon.

In 1954, following the Apostolic Constitution *Sponsa Christi* of Pius XII, federations of monasteries were established. Mother Clara was elected counselor of the budding Federation of Cantabria, where her ideals were soon widely echoed. Later on, other communities decided to federate with those of Cantabria and to form a common novitiate, that of Soria.

### *Into better hands*

MOTHER Clara was re-elected every three years in accordance with the Constitutions; she would hold the office of abbess for eighteen years. However, from the end of the second triennium, her potential re-election was subject to the formal authorization of the Congregation of Religious. In granting such permission in 1955, the Congregation warned that this would be her last consecutive three-year term. After the 1958 Chapter, Mother Clara left the abbatial office. It was a joy for her to be relieved of its responsibilities and to be able to give herself fully to obedience, because she now felt more at liberty to devote herself to the things of God. She fulfilled even the slightest observances with great joy, as well as the wishes of the new abbess and of each of the sisters. To a friar who asked her if after so many years of being superior

she did not feel a void, she replied with simplicity: "Not at all, the office has now passed into better hands!"

At the end of her abbatiage, Mother Clara was appointed vicar and mistress of novices; she would hold these positions until her death. She devoted herself to her novices with great zeal, providing for all their needs, be they spiritual or material. In her profound humility, she was capable of relying on the novitiate auxiliary assigned to her. Whenever disciplinary difficulties arose, she placed their solution completely in her hands, saying: "She'll do that better than I can." She reserved catechism and choral singing to herself. To make the teaching of Christian doctrine easier and more pleasant, she summarized it in poems which she had the nuns sing to popular tunes or to airs of her own composition. She also loved to read with her novices in dialogue in order to stimulate their attention; she helped them to develop a sound autonomy of mind and to take the initiative, especially when she detected special aptitudes in them. In her talks, she endeavored to make them understand that all favors come from God, and that humility is the cement of all virtues.

Mother Clara remained in good health until the end of her life, but she spoke of her death very naturally: "Come, my sister death, come," she was wont to say: "I can't wait to see you, so that I can fly to heaven with my Beloved!" Two weeks before her death, she fell and broke several ribs, which left her in great pain. She had announced that she would go quietly. Anticipating her death, she took Communion every day as a viaticum, and said: "How beautiful it would be if one day, after taking Communion, I were to be found dead in my stall in the choir!" A few minutes before her death, she told one of the sisters in the kitchen that she would soon be dead, without burdening them. It was as she was crossing the cloister on her way to the Mother Vicar's office on January 22, 1973, at around eleven o'clock in the morning, that she collapsed without a cry, struck down by a sudden heart attack.

Following the example of the venerable Mother Clara of Soria, let us turn with joy and wonder to the Eucharist, so that we may experience the truth of the Word of JESUS to his disciples: "I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Mt 28:20).

*+ Fr. Jean-Bernard, Abbot  
and all the monks of the Abbey*

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**Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey – 21150 Flavigny-sur-Ozerain – France**

email : [abbey@clairval.com](mailto:abbey@clairval.com) – website : <http://www.clairval.com/>

