

Where the threads cross. From Family to Claretian Familiarity

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1. Entering the family home

You don't really know a family until you spend some time at home. There, inside the home, we find not only the reality that is perceived with the naked eye and that everyone can recognize (our *family*, our basic nucleus of belonging) but also the invisible threads that unite or disunite us as time goes by (our *familiarity*, our bonds and relational, transformative and implicative processes). Because one thing is what we are and another how we are becoming; one thing is the reality that is offered to us: another, the life that we really come to embrace.

We are gathered here, different people summoned to an encounter of the Claretian Family. It is understood that, if we are here, in some way we all

know that we are part of this reality, which does not come from blood or flesh, as the prologue of John's Gospel says, but from shared faith and charism. But it is already more difficult to know to what extent being a *family* is allowing each one of us to live bonds of *familiarity*. Perhaps we continue to see the family from the outside or from afar, even though we are part of it. Perhaps we have not come to know this house that is offered to us well enough to want to live in it. Perhaps there are still too many loose ends between us that have not yet been woven together? Or perhaps we are simply *family*, but we do not know how to proceed in order to live our *familiarity* more and more intensely. In case this should happen to us, I would like during this shared time to take a short journey in which we can recognize the charismatic family to which we belong, be grateful for the familiarity that we already enjoy and encourage us to grow in it for the life of the world.

So let us go into our family home and stop to contemplate the place where the threads of our familiarity cross. This last phrase, *where the threads are crossed*, is not a poetic image empty of real content: on the contrary, it has for us a lot of backstories. It reminds us, in the first place, that the house of the Claretian Family has the shape of a loom, because something like this has been built on the foundations that St. Anthony Mary Claret left us. And it invites us, on the other hand, to fix our gaze on the definitive detail of every textile work: to weave a tapestry, a serge, or a carpet many factors have to be put into play, but what really configures a piece of cloth are those places where two or more threads cross to give birth to something new that goes beyond them. That is why when an expert wants to check the quality and workmanship of a garment, he always examines its reverse side looking for the crossing of the threads, the place where its true consistency and beauty reside.

2. *From the cardboard workshop*

We begin this journey through the loom *of* the Claretian Family, our house, *from the cardboard workshop*. According to the dictionary meanings, a workshop is not only the "place where a work of hands is worked", but also the "school or seminar of sciences or arts" and the "school or seminar of arts". The "set of collaborators of a teacher". In a workshop, therefore, *place*, *learning* and *collaboration* are articulated. Looking a little deeper, the workshop is primarily the people: we, from St. Anthony Mary Claret onwards, are the first place where the threads of Claretian familiarity cross.

It may seem obvious, but we cannot overlook it. "Claretian family", "Claretian spirituality", "Claretian mission" and other similar syntagms always run the risk of denoting useless abstractions if we do not refer them to the concrete persons in whom they are incarnated. Before going on, let us seriously ask ourselves this question: when I hear *Claretian spirituality*,

which person do I think of? When I hear *Claretian mission*, what person appears on my horizon? When I hear *Claretian Family*, who appears in my heart? And no less important: am I able to identify myself in these expressions? Familiarity necessarily involves finding a face to look at and to be looked at by when opening the door of one's own home. Lest we end up living surrounded by beautiful concepts that allow us to dream peacefully but lack flesh and leave us alone forever. Perhaps from this encounter we will only take with us the determined desire to strengthen ties with someone concrete of our Claretian Family. Maybe that someone is oneself. Or one of those I see on the screen. If so, we will have achieved a lot: everything we invest in concrete relationships will be a gain in familiarity.

In the human group that makes up our workshop, there is no doubt, the head of the family is St. Anthony Mary Claret and Clare. I call him by his full name because I do not want his person or his holiness to be blurred in the affectionate appellation Claret, which we use so much. Claret cannot be for us a commonplace or a thread that we take for granted and that we name to put the cherry on top of our family gatherings. Claret is St. Anthony Mary Claret and Clare, the man in whom the threads of God and of the world were crossed so that we could become part of this loom. Not so much because directly or indirectly we recognize him as the charismatic founder of each of our houses. Not even because he would have wanted to set up an ecclesial reality such as the Claretian Family, as we live it today (in my opinion, this is a lot to say).

The key is to see the man, and to see him as the foreman of a workshop to whom the collaborators look to learn from him how to weave the threads of familiarity. We need to read, to know, to contemplate St. Anthony Mary Claret y Clará, the master of the workshop. We must be able to discover him -in the Autobiography and beyond it- as a man of *family relationships*. Without projecting on him an ideal or contemporary image, but letting him project his humanity on us, as he was. Because in his concrete humanity there are outstanding traits of familiarity that can encourage and shape our own. Familiarity with God, with Mary, with the saints, with the needy, with relatives, with the Church, with companions, with brothers and sisters. Although we think we know who is the Claret of the Claretian Family, the Saint Anthony Mary Claret and Clare of the Claretian familiarity is yet to be discovered.

"As my father was a spinner and weaver, he put me to work in the factory. I obeyed without saying a word, or making a bad face, or showing any displeasure. I went to work and worked as hard as I could, without ever being lazy or unwilling to work for a day; and I did everything as well as I knew how, so as not to displease my dear parents in any way, whom I loved very much, and they loved me too" [St. ANTHONY MARY CLARET, *Autobiography* 31].

"In the evening, when there were hardly any people left in the church, I would return and alone I would talk to the Lord, with what faith, with what trust and with what love I spoke to the Lord, to my good Father! I offered myself a thousand times to his holy service, I wanted to be a priest to consecrate myself day and night to his ministry, and I remember saying to him: Humanly I see no hope at all, but you are so powerful that if you want to, you will arrange everything. And I remember that I confidently left myself in his divine hands, hoping that he would arrange what was to be done, as indeed he did" [SAINT ANTHONY MARY CLARET, *Autobiography* 40].

"Those who live in company help each other with advice, conversations, examples, prayers and protection (...). They are the companions with whom we live as eyes with which we see what we have to do; they are like hands with which we do what we ought to do, and they are like souls that encourage us in the fulfillment of our duties" [St. ANTHONY MARY CLARET, *Lay Clerics in Community* 5].

According to our faith, when do we enter into a deeper relationship of knowledge and affection with one another (also with ourselves, with Claret, with God)? Familiarity is woven, above all, in prayer, which is both hope and learning. In prayer, as in the tapestry workshop, these two fundamental movements unfold: to hope and to learn. First, we have to outline what we hope for, to project what we wish to live. We pray to know what we are promised and to let the desire for what we are called to experience grow in us. We pray like someone who paints a piece of cardboard for tapestry: the cardboard is not yet the tapestry, but it already has its size, its shape, its colors. Even in a livelier and more beautiful form than what will later come out of the loom. And it is important and good that it is so. We must be able to receive and desire before God the Claretian familiarity that we would like and are willing to live. I am not referring -or not only- to the moments of common prayer in which we gather as a family. Already in the solitude of personal prayer, we are called to

I pray, but I pray with and for others; I pray myself, but I do it as a member of a family that precedes and transcends me; I contemplate myself, but I have before me the Christ of all, open like a book; finally, "the Spirit of our Father and our Mother" speaks for me, as Saint Anthony Mary Claret and Clare, the man, used to say:

"Hear our counsel; be guided by it; behold, we speak to you from God who says to you: (...) Look and do according to the example shown to you on Mount Calvary. This is the eternal Son of the Father in whom he is well pleased: listen to him with care, imitate him with perfection, study his virtues, look at him as a book written inside and out, and open on the lectern of the holy cross" [S. ANTHONY MARY CLARET, *The Learned Schoolboy* I,2-3].

In a second moment, prayer is also the beginning of learning. Like most of the important things in life, family is given to us, but familiarity is learned over time. It is learned by threading encounters with one another and letting our relationships sink into our hearts. It is a process very similar to what is

done in the workshop with the threads before beginning the work: so that the spools do not get tangled, the threads must be reeled in little by little, as if ruminating on them, giving rise to a process very similar to that of Mary with the Word. Winding is precisely that: "winding a thread, wire, rope, etc., successively around a shaft, spool, etc.". In the cardboard workshop one learns to place the raw material by carefully and attentively turning its fundamental elements and, in this way, one arranges everything in an orderly manner for the common work. The Claretian familiarity will be an impossible longing without this learning that will have us all our life reeling the master threads of our shared spirituality through study and prayer. St. Anthony Mary Claret used to say that both, study and prayer, are the two feet of the missionary, perhaps because without them it is impossible to give order, depth and stability to our relationship with God and with our brothers. The famous anecdote of youth that the saint refers to when he recalls his years as an apprentice in Barcelona points precisely in this direction:

"Of all the things I have studied and applied myself to during my life, none have I understood as much as manufacturing. (...) When after much discourse I succeeded in the decomposition and composition of the sample, I felt a joy, I experienced a satisfaction, that I walked around the house like mad with contentment. (...) On a certain day, I asked the butler of the factory if that sample that we both had in our hands would be made in this and this way (...) And a few days later I presented him with the drawing of the apparatus necessary to produce that sample (...). The butler was confused and admired when he [saw] my drawings and heard my reasons and explanations" [S. ANTONIO MARIA CLARET, *Autobiography* 58-60].

3. At the Royal Tapestry Factory

Although our familiarity has its roots in the cardboard workshop, the Claretian Family spends most of our time *in the Royal Tapestry Factory*. It is *real* in the double sense of the term: for what it has of *present* (ours is a reality that exists objectively) and for what it has of *royalty* (ours is a holy familiarity that comes from above). And we call this second room a *factory* because in it there are processes of *manufacturing* products and *transformation* of energy. The real tapestry factory is, in a word, the place where the threads of routine and patient work are crossed, in which a textile piece that did not exist before is produced: in this piece the threads are incorporated and transformed, but not only, those who have made it emerge from their hands are also transformed.

Although sometimes we would like to see God's will for us fulfilled immediately, nothing grows without His time. Time is the father of craftsmanship and the best foreman of a factory. Master upholsterers know this well: those who still work manually in this craft say that it takes a week to weave a square meter of carpet of common materials and between eight and fourteen months for each square meter of a tapestry of gold, silver and

silk. Only with the longtime of many people working at the same time, with constancy and commitment, the threads are gathered and strengthened and then passed through their exact place until they form a compact and beautiful network of knots. St. Anthony Mary Claret himself spoke in these terms to encourage the common life of the clergy:

"Those who compose the ropes work them in threes: first they join three threads in one, then three of these in another, etc., etc., thus resulting in a very beautiful and very strong rope. A single thread is very easy to break, but with its companions, it is very difficult" [St. ANTHONY MARY CLARET, *Lay Clerics in Community* 12].

Thank God, our royal tapestry factory opened its doors decades ago. If St. Anthony Mary Claret is the soul of the family workshop, the very history of the Claretian Family is the heart of our factory. In case we do not do it enough, we have to talk and listen to each other about the Claretian Family and value what we have been working together both at the institutional and personal level. If this does not happen, each new generation may be tempted to start from scratch as if the previous generations had done little or almost nothing. Especially when it comes to realities, like our family, where it always seems to us that things could be so much better. One can perceive in this a point of arrogance - or at least of ignorance - which, although it does not destroy the family, it does slow down a lot the familiarity we are looking for. Because present and future familiarity means recognizing that the warp has long since been set on the loom and welcoming the weft of crosses and knots.

How much do we know of the road travelled by the Claretian Family up to now? When we look back,

Are we capable of thanking and receiving the wisdom accumulated in those who have woven before us in this family loom, to the point of being able to say of them, like Claret of the Church, that they are companions, dispensers of grace, directors, mothers, wet nurses, lovers?

"The faithful companion of Jesus Christ, the dispenser of graces, the director of the family, the mother always fruitful through preaching and the Sacraments, and the ever charitable and loving nurse of her children, who nourishes them with her breasts always full of doctrine and good works" [S. ANTHONY MARY CLARET, Notes on a plan to preserve the beauty of the Church and to preserve it, "The Church" 3].

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The warp of our tapestry, which is a gift and legacy, is made up of a series of threads that remain fixed vertically on the loom and serve as a guide for other threads to pass through, to intertwine, to join, to knot. Those who have been working more intensely in the fabric of the Claretian Family have been able to identify them in *seven traits of spirituality* that unite us and that serve as a point of reference for our endeavors. I will not comment on them at

length, but it is good to know them and to keep them always in front of us, in tension, so that the fabric of our familiarity goes ascending with the best guides: 1) filial experience; 2) prayer, Eucharist and Word; 3) apostolic mission; 4) anointing to evangelize the poor; 5) attention to the signs of the times for a creative evangelization; 6) shared mission and universality, 7) in the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

Attention to the warp and the advancement of the weft are the basic coordinates of those who inhabit the real factory. But beyond or beyond them, every tapestry has its *weave*, that is to say, a "law according to which the threads cross and link with the passes to form the fabric". It is the law that makes it possible for the threads to cross in a certain way and in certain places and that, therefore, sustain the bonds of our familiarity. What is or should this law be in the Claretian Family, the weave of the tapestry that we are weaving? I would dare to recall here that, as in the rest of the families, our armor must be that of *concrete love* - "to love well", Claret used to say-, which requires the continuous search for true charity, on the one hand, and the commitment of our own life and vocation, on the other. In two words, concrete love is *conversion* and *surrender*. Among ourselves, familiarity expands every time we put our own vocation at stake for one another and every time we take a step of charity in God's way. When we know how to see in others the service and the dispossession that are born of the Gospel and we give thanks for it and join in its movement from the heart. Also when we are ready to accept our own sin, selfishness, envy and misunderstanding, and we reposition everything in the light of God's love in a spirit of conversion:

"To love is to love well. We must love our neighbor well, we must feel his sorrows and we must rejoice in his prosperities, never envy them; we must try to remedy his needs in the best possible way" (St. ANTHONY MARY CLARET, *The Temple and Palace of God our Lord VII*).

From what I have been saying up to this point we can conclude that work is the second great driving force of Claretian familiarity, the second great place where the threads cross. I am not speaking now exactly of *mission*, or *shared mission*, which are broader realities, but of pure and hard *work*. What it costs to set up a real tapestry factory and what we are really living as a family at this moment, we can see it there, in the place of work, in the smallness of the works that we carry out with one another, with each other. And even more, in the peculiar style that we imprint on the common work that we carry out. Work - needless to say - that unfolds in multiple facets and directions, because, as in any textile factory, the work of manufacture is very numerous: those who restore the part of the tapestry that has been damaged, those who clean the carpet that has been trodden so much, those who grease

the fulling mill, those who adjust the weft, those who check the weft, work in a familiar and clear way. There are a thousand ways of giving the sweat of one's brow to grow in the familiarity that the Church and the world expect of us:

"We know that Jesus Christ has called us to his holy house to work as he did: *As the Father has sent me, so I send you*. Yes, we must all work according to the talents and graces we have received from the Lord, and whoever cannot because of infirmity or old age, let him make up for it with prayer. So important is the work of each one according to his talents that without it, everything is lost" [S. ANTHONY MARY CLARET, *Notices to a priest*, "Appendix"].

4. *For the great market of the world*

Without leaving the house-loom (weaver), with many hours of prayer and work behind, the Claretian Family prepares and arranges its fabrics *for the great market of the world*. "Lonja" is a word whose present meaning has been practically restricted to the port place where fish is bought and sold. But, in reality, it designates generically every public square of exchange and, particularly, the somewhat elevated atrium to which the doors of the temples look out. It is the open space where the twisted threads find their definitive place beyond the workshop and the factory, a destination with a universal vocation.

In saying that the great marketplace of the world is the last place where the threads of our familiarity cross, we become aware that the Claretian Family does not have its ultimate meaning in itself but is called to live out its life in the history of each day so that others may have life. We may ask ourselves how this is possible when the opportunities to present ourselves together in society are rather rare. In general, we do not live together, and we do not have many shared apostolic projects. Of course, we can continue to take steps in this area. However, I believe that the most important thing is not in these projects but in the perspective from which each one of us situates ourselves among the people, our form of presence. In fact, Claretian familiarity should shape our way of being in the world even when we are not together in a palpable way. One can present oneself to others as a man, as a son, as a brother, as a believer, as a missionary, as a priest (each one can add or subtract from this mode of presence)? Do we ever present ourselves as members of the Claretian family in a broad sense? We do it, undoubtedly, when we pray or work as a family, but the familiarity that is enlightened and worked there is called to permeate our relationships beyond ourselves. It would be a pity if the richness that we share inwardly were not transparent outwardly. It would be like wishing and weaving a tapestry that ends up locked up in the factory's storerooms or frayed and ignored on a wall. So that

this does not happen to us, we need to finish the tapestry in order to take it out into the street, into the market, into the present. The tapestry of our familiarity, like all tapestries, needs its *selvage*, that end of the cloth where the weft is finished off with a stronger thread of a different color, so that everyone can see it when it is exposed to the sunlight. The things of God shine like this, like a singular grace, but visible - with its own color - in ordinary places, in unnoticed people:

"I once thought how it could be that so much peace, so much joy, so much good harmony reigned in so many subjects and for so long a time, and I could give myself no other reason than to say: *Digitus Dei est hic*. This is a singular grace that God dispenses to us by his infinite goodness and mercy. I knew that the Lord blessed the means we used to obtain this very special grace" [St. ANTHONY MARY CLARET, *Autobiography* 609].

The market is the place of daily business and mission. It is the place where one enters and leaves, where one buys and sells, where one searches and finds, where one talks about life and reaches out to others. In this public square there is also a place for us as a family, as long as we know how to feel the heartbeat of the people and of God in each moment. If the workshop connected us with St. Anthony Mary Claret and his sons, and the factory with the history of the Claretian Family, the marketplace urges us to go out of our small circle to meet with the rest of the ecclesial community and with the world, to feel with the Church, as St. Ignatius said, and also with the world. To be part of the Claretian Family does not mean to be integrated into a self-sufficient ecclesial superstructure that encompasses eight institutions with a common charism, it means to convey in the personal vocation a familiar living of the charism received. And to transmit this familiarity, which is also part of the charism, to all those we meet along the way. The institutional structures are for us

It is the vocation of each one lived as a family that can offer something to our Church, to our society.

As I insinuated a little earlier, it may be more difficult to recognize ourselves as *family* in this sense because the spaces of shared mission at the institutional level among us are not so many. But I insist: we must value the presence in the world of each person of the Claretian Family and the bonds that unite us as our main channel of mission. In this sense, our charismatic *family* constitutes a very small portion of the people of God that is on pilgrimage in the world and we do not have to design a specific mission, to our measure, to be able to be fruitful in the midst of the people: it is enough to collaborate *as a family* with the great mission of God through the different ways -ecclesial or not- in which we can make ourselves present daily. This does not prevent that, at a given moment, concrete missionary initiatives with the seal of the Claretian Family may arise: they are welcome, but let us not

look for them with anguish or force them too much. On the contrary: let us be grateful and support them when they come and, in everything else, let us try to grow in familiarity also in the particular mission of each one, knowing that what we owe to one another -and all of us to the world- is that family love that seeks to serve Jesus Christ himself in our neighbor and in every circumstance:

"To preserve and increase this love or charity, you must see in each of our neighbours Jesus Christ himself (...). Let us do things, then, as one who serves Jesus Christ and not men, and in this way we will also do them in a good way and with good grace. And when our neighbor does us some service, we must also see Jesus Christ in him, as St. Peter did when he saw Jesus Christ at his feet to wash them, and he was astonished and said: "*Lord, are you washing my feet?*" [St. ANTHONY MARY CLARET, *Ascetical Letter*, 4].

It is this love of closeness that gives liveliness to our tapestry and makes it capable of embellishing and warming a large room. Therein lies our fruitfulness: in the family love that is capable of suffering, of *suffering* - in the double meaning of the term - with the rest of the Church and with the world. *To suffer* is one of the verbs that Claret conjugates the most. And for us it should also be a central category. The saint says, for example, when explaining the life of the Christian:

"True Christians, while they are in this world, are like mothers in labor; they have to suffer much the pains and labors that are inseparable from this valley of tears and cause them some sadness, but at the end of life they will rejoice to see that they have given birth to such great and good works for the heavenly homeland" [St. ANTHONY MARY CLARET, *Imitation of the Patient Christ*, "Warning"].

He who suffers with the Church and with the world, with others, not only exorcises his own selfishness, but is able to understand and help his brother. How much more so if to this suffering we add the value of the

In this way, in reaching out, we do not only offer ourselves individually, but we offer the joy of a family that walks ecclesially. In the great market of the world, we share the different pieces of cloth devised in the workshop and executed in the factory of the Claretian Family: a tapestry here, a carpet there, a tablecloth there? Sometimes we do it together as a family; other times, it is done by each one of the branches; almost always, a community or an individual person who listens to those who need warmth or beauty and provides the right piece at the right time. In that piece, which carries so much prayer, so much work, so much suffering, we are all crossing the threads of our familiarity in the definitive place.

5. *With airs of yesterday and today*

This journey through our family home, as I have wanted to propose it to you, has something to do with my experience and my personal perception of the Claretian family and familiarity, but not only or mainly. In fact, before inviting you to enter the loom in this way, I have tried to take the pulse of our past -reading and praying with St. Anthony Mary Claret- and our present -tuning with the Church and the world of our time-. The result, although poor, tries to put the focus where they invite to do so in order to open doors to the future.

Perhaps the imprint of St. Anthony Mary Claret in this visit to our house is more easily perceived. Not only in the texts that have been marking it, but also in the very structure of the loom. It is well known that in the little paper that he wrote for all the missionaries to always carry with them, Claret affirms that a Son of the Immaculate Heart of Mary is a man who "thinks only of how he will follow and imitate Jesus Christ in praying, working and suffering". Well, the threads of our Claretian familiarity cross in a great loom formed by the workshop, where we *pray*; the factory, where we *work* and the market, where we *suffer*. Herein lies our spirituality.

However, it may be that the inspiration drawn from the ecclesial and human community of our time has remained more hidden and deserves a more leisurely attention at a later time. I limit myself here to pointing out that this way of presenting our charismatic family and the greater familiarity to which we are invited connects with the three great impulses that, in my opinion, represent the heart of the magisterium of Pope Francis, his great calls for the whole Church and humanity in this historical time: a call to care for *relationship* ("he called them to be with him" [Mt 3:14a]: cf. *Gaudete et exsultate*, *Amoris laetitia*), to seek *conversion* ("miserando atque eligendo": cf. *Laudato si'*, *Fratelli tutti*) and to face the *mission* ("and to send them out to preach" [Mt 3:14b]: cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Christus vivit*). This is the basis of our discernment.

If we conjugate these three verbs - to love, to work and to suffer - with these three processes - relationship, conversion, and mission - we will find the back room of faith that sustains the small great work of our weaving hands and allows us to continue in the task towards a promising future. But of all this you will say to me - like Paul in the Areopagus - we will hear you speak another day, because this day of work is about to end and there is still much to be cut.