



Quote: Sophie Lespinasse-Milan, *Danced spiritual life of Teresa of Avila and current witnesses*, Gestures and dances, testimony of the Poor Clare sisters, online seminar n°12, Dance and Spirituality/Christianity, International Council of Dance, 22/11/2025.

"Danced Spiritual Life of Teresa of Avila and Current Witnesses" Gestures and dances, testimony of the Poor Clare sisters

Poor Clare of Cormontreuil (00'10")

The genesis of prayer through the moving body (00'20")

Indeed, I was there at the very beginning of this initiative, which began at least forty or fifty years ago. I was a very young teacher, and I remember it started because we had seen our sisters in Africa dancing. We were aware that we didn't have the same physical expression as them, who dance from the moment they are little, even while still in their mother's womb, then on their mother's back, and then they dance.

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You can feel that their bodies are often in motion to express things.
They can't offer a gift without dancing.

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Here, they bring the dessert, not on their heads...

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...on their heads while dancing. So they are very graceful, even when it's a song about their mother's loincloth, which doesn't strictly have a religious purpose, but they express it with great grace nonetheless.

Intercultural Experiences France-Africa (01'35")

In 2012, we had the pleasure of welcoming six sisters from various monasteries across Africa, I believe. They had just experienced a significant retreat in Assisi, where our roots lie, the home of our foundress.

They came to visit us, as we have ties to our foundation, and they stayed for several months. So, we had the great joy of dancing together in the choir.

Already there.

[Photograph]

What was truly beautiful was that we taught them some of our gestures, so they imitated our gestures, and they taught us... this is a Magnificat from Abidjan.

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Three years ago, I spent three months training with Benedictine monks and nuns. There were many brothers and sisters from Africa and Madagascar. I danced with them, but in their own style of dance.

[Video]

For me, it's a bit like the experience of the Poor Clares who came in 2012. Learning to dance with others is also a language and a way of communicating with them. That's what gestures and dance allow us to do: learn to communicate with others, but in a different way.

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There, they brought a tiered cake... I didn't remember Marie-Reine dancing with the tiered cake on her head.

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Yes, that's right. Each one has a dish on her head.

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Then we had a Chapter of the Mats. They were all there, six, even eight. And there you have it, they're being danced in the community hall.

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It must have been a hymn about Saint Clare, judging by the reverent expressions. Here you are together, practicing the gestures during the celebration.

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Here is the procession of the Gospel book with the drum.

[Photograph]

And who is honored by the ox tails that are swung like this, as a sign of respect.

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So I had a candle on my head, and the sisters only looked at the candle because they were afraid it would slip and fall! It wasn't very reverent! We had brought the Gospel book like that.

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I remember. It was very beautiful, the emphasis on the Word.

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Then there was the Magnificat too, with palm branches. We don't have any palm branches, so we used flowers from the garden. It was very beautiful because it's a very spirited Magnificat. Ours is more contemplative...

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...Yes, theirs is enthusiastic, they cheer.

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Those were beautiful moments.

And now an offertory procession...



From Latin to French: words that take on a tangible form (05'30")

We were leaving Latin behind, beginning to learn French (it was the post-Vatican II era), and we were discovering with wonder all that the psalms, prayers, hymns, and so on contained.

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[Photographs]

All the feelings, prayers, calls, and adoration that God stirred within us... we needed to express all of this with our bodies. Since we were starting to learn French, the sisters still needed to familiarize themselves with the French translations and allow themselves to be filled with it all. The Cistercian Francophone Commission was in full creative flow, writing hymn texts... So, songs, canticles... There was truly a wealth of creativity!

First creation in community: the *Magnificat* (06'40")

The first song we tried to perform with gestures, but which has lasted for forty years now, because it was so simple...

(It was really something that was just beginning to emerge within us. So it wasn't tentative, but it was a search, the beginning of a search.)

...was the Magnificat. A woman expresses her gratitude to God:

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

And so we searched for gestures together. There were five or six of us; I can still see us on the lawn. That's when we entered into a creative phase. None of us were dance specialists, and thankfully so.

[Photograph]

I think it would have taken a different turn and perhaps become elitist gestures. But it didn't.

We began: "My soul magnifies the Lord..."

It flowed from there. One person suggested this gesture, another that gesture. We reflected, we agreed, and a consensus gradually emerged on the entire Magnificat.

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It is both personal and communal. Yes, it is a beautiful experience of fatherhood where we listen fully to one another, express ourselves fully, with great respect and, at the same time, with a desire to express together something of what we receive in a Church text.

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[Photograph]

This is a Gloria. It was extraordinary because there were two sisters from Cormontreuil, two sisters from Vermand, plus six sisters from different foundations. C'est intéressant parce que vous étiez retrouvées pour, ensemble, préparer...



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...the evenings we spent trying to reach an agreement!

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Yes, it's definitely a bit of a challenge!

When gestures help the community to pray (09'15")

In our community, for festive occasions, the sisters would often express existing religious hymns with gestures, working together and agreeing on specific gestures or movements to convey something of the text's meaning.

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For example, the hymn "The Potter" was performed by three sisters during a celebration, among ourselves in the community room.

And this gestural expression resonated within us, truly bringing forth, stirring, and raising within us a prayer that was, in a way, an acknowledgment of the Creator and of God's, the Father's, presence with each person.

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We spontaneously felt that it could be expressed in the choir, as it moved us deeply to prayer. So it was expressed in the choir. Then, when the sisters stopped, other sisters took up the mantle, and it continues.

Liturgical dances... (10'50")

The grace of the Cormontreuil community (which was then located elsewhere) was that it was a community actively involved in its own prayer, in the prayer of the Church, that is, during the services, during Mass, and not just amongst ourselves in a community room.

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[Photograph]

There was a Lord's Prayer that I particularly cherish. There were things, in essence, that we discovered in the Lord's Prayer through their gestures. What they expressed gave another dimension to the Lord's Prayer. So the sisters asked that this also be done in the choir. There are occasional requests from the community for help in praying this text, during a service or during the Eucharist.

...and festive (11'55")

This year, we celebrated Sister Claire-Myriam's silver jubilee, and Brother Michel Laloux was there.

[Photograph]

During the celebration, the Magnificat you prepared outside on the lawn is still there!

[Photograph]



In fact, it plays a big part, because the Magnificat, essentially, embodies all the joy of the Church, so during a jubilee, it's the perfect time to express it!

It still makes a big impression on people, because the congregation loves to see it and express it. It's very joyful.

Then there was Sister Denise-Marie's solemn profession on December 8th, it was the same, there were those dances again, both the offertory dances and the Magnificat.

People talked a lot about the Magnificat afterward.

It was after her vows, I think.

Yes, it was after her vows, after the signing. That's it, it was around the time of Advent, because it was Advent.

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[Photograph]

Here, it's also a Magnificat where the entire community is sketching the gesture of the refrain.

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There you have it, it speaks volumes.

So, it's truly a completely communal expression at that moment.

The sisters also love it because they join in with the group that is gesturing the verses through the refrain.

Creation and transmission of a directory (13'35")

You know I'm very organized, right?!

Oh yes! Absolutely!

I joined twenty years ago this year. I was captivated by the gestures. You were my instructor, my novice mistress. I asked you if I could join, and I was fortunate enough to be able to begin. What was so beautiful was that the sisters passed on the gestures to me. I didn't originally, I just signed up...

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This also encouraged them to delve deeper into the meaning, because there's a primary meaning, and then you discover hidden meanings within the gestures you make.

They were amazed because, to remember...

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Yes, of course!

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I already memorized the text, I prayed it, and then, when it was passed on to me, I added little drawings. [Illustrations]

I remember that it made several people smile. I made myself a folder with all the gestures we used to do. We used to do a lot of them. Now, we hardly do any anymore.

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Here, it's "O day so full of joys." Only I can understand it, though! You see.



[Illustrations]

Those two sisters used to gesture, now there aren't many of us who still gesture.

I used to do them, there was something for everything...

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But I thought you were drawing, you weren't actually drawing, you were making comments.

Here's my list of all the ones I participated in.

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I even kept, you see, the folder from 2012. It had all the African dances I had learned. There were quite a lot, we had learned many different rhythms.

Praying through dancing, a journey (15'50")

I truly discovered something when I entered the monastery: that dance could also be a form of prayer. As a child, I loved to dance because we had a folk dance association where I lived, and I was part of the troupe throughout my middle school years.

I learned many dances, and as an adult, I enjoyed partner dances, dances for two. Here, my discovery was that one could pray with the body, and that this could even be done during a service.

So, quite quickly, when I received the habit and became a novice, I joined the team of sisters who led the choir in gestures. Gestures are not like dance; they are gestures performed in response to a text, a song, or a psalm. This allows the Word of God to dwell in a different way, in our bodies and also in our prayer life.

Dancing through the ordeal (17'10")

The liturgy coordinator liked a dance I had suggested, which had moved me when I saw Brother Michel Laloux perform it. It's called T'Filati. We added French lyrics, Elisabeth added some, so it means "My Prayer."

This dance was the first one we created for the liturgy, and it made a deep impression on me because it's based on Psalm 54, a psalm of supplication. It coincided with a difficult time I was going through with a family member, and I danced it specifically to that experience. It helped me in my personal life.

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It's true that every time I dance it, I'm reminded that it's a supplication, a cry to the Lord.

[Dances]



International Dance Council, official partner of UNESCO
Dance and Spirituality Program, Dance and Christianity Group
Seminar n°12 of November 22nd, 2025
"Danced Spiritual Life of Teresa of Avila and Current Witnesses"
Gestures and dances, testimony of the Poor Clare sisters
By Sophie Lespinasse-Milan (22'50")



Credits (19'10")

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Vidéo (19'55")