

## Background of the Franciscan Movement

Francis and Clare were baptized towards the end of the twelfth century during a time of great transition in the economy, culture, society, and Church. *It was the age of renewed mobility.* By the middle of the eleventh century, Europe was effectively free from the barbarian invasions that had plagued the fourth through tenth centuries. The so-called ‘dark ages’ had come to an end after the northern European plunderers – the Lombards, Goths, Vikings, Tartars, and Moslems – were either repelled or absorbed and settled in the Roman lands. Thus, the populace felt safer to move about. The old Roman roads were then rebuilt and were soon teeming with merchants, pilgrims, crusaders, preachers, and wandering minstrels.

*It was the age of the merchant.* In the age before Francis and Clare’s birth, wealth had been concentrated in land, which was owned by the privileged, aristocratic nobility. That was feudalism, an antiquated caste system which guaranteed wealth and privileges to the few land owners, and relegated everyone else to a subservient social status. However, a consequence of the new mobility was that trade began to re-emerge and cities began re-developing. The merchants and artisans were now free to move about to buy and sell their merchandise. In doing so, they acquired massive amounts of capital. The marketplaces were located in the cities, which greatly expanded as people flooded in to participate in the market economy. Thus, the economy boomed and transitioned from a land-based system to one anchored in money-based markets.

*It was the age of the communal conflicts.* The new economic reality challenged feudalism. The upwardly mobile merchants were powerful enough with their new wealth to confront the older land-based aristocracy. Emboldened by their money and power, merchants (as well as artisans, traders, and bankers) rose up and tore down the old feudal castles from which the overlords oppressed them. They demanded new rights and in place of the old feudal castles they established the *commune*, an independent city Republic governed by them. The well-entrenched nobility did not let go of their centuries-old birthrights, titles, and affluence without a fight, which took place in the tribunals, in the alleys, on the battlefields. After gaining the upper hand, the merchants soon supplanted

the old land-based nobility with their own tightly controlled mercantile aristocracy, from which they soon excluded everyone else.

*It was the age of chivalry.* Armored knights on horses, swords and shields, castles and damsels, tournaments and hunts, heraldry and banners. Honor, mercy, courtesy, courage, justice. Protection of the weakest, *amour* (courtly love), gallantry toward women, and service to God. These were the things of chivalry. It was an era when minstrels meandered through the towns singing *chansons* of the deeds of great knights like Galahad, Arthur, Lancelot, and Tristan.

*It was the age of religious conflict and reform.* With such cultural romanticization of war, the Crusades flourished, and it was not difficult to compel Christian knights and peasants alike to set out with sword or pitchfork in hand to the Holy Land, which they sought to liberate from the Infidel. This was an era when Italian cities and towns were jealously lorded over by Popes or German Emperors. Outright armed skirmishes between Papal and Imperial armies for temporal control of territories were not uncommon. The Popes, likewise, challenged the Emperor in other parts of Europe for ultimate authority to appoint local bishops and clergy. The Popes were seeking enough independence to govern church affairs without thwarting imperial 'protection.' The Emperors, on the other hand, sought to maintain temporal (sometimes even spiritual) rule over Europe, without losing Papal blessings or being excommunicated, either of which would cause them to lose support among their subjects and weaken their political power.

In order to reduce the influence of the Emperor from ecclesial affairs and restore the moral integrity of the clergy, a series of reforms were initiated by Pope Gregory VII in the eleventh century. Known as the Gregorian Reforms, these changes spearheaded a religious revival among the laity, as well. Reacting against so much opulence and feudal power present in many bishoprics and Abbeys, scores of ordinary Christians longed to return to the simplicity of the early Church described in the Gospels. This movement became known as the *vita evangelica* (the Gospel life), and these Christians rejected wealth, embraced material poverty, and lived itinerantly.

The religious orders underwent reform as well. Since the time of St. Benedict of the sixth century, the monastic model had been held up as the archetype of religious life and fit nicely into agrarian society: the livelihood of the monks was based on the land. In

farming society, the monasteries served the people well, as they were usually located outside the cities in the rural areas where the people lived. Monastic life, however, was now proving less successful at meeting the spiritual needs of the growing urban populace of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. Monasticism thus underwent reform led by Robert of Molesme and Bernard of Clairvaux, who created the Cistercian order. Later, reformed monks took to the road preaching the historical Jesus of Scripture and exhorting listeners to nurture a personal relationship with Christ.

*It was the age of the heretic.* Initially, perhaps, the motives of the many lay preachers were well-intentioned; however, soon many of them began directing their invectives against the worldliness of the clergy. This led to denunciations, schisms, and some excommunications. Particularly troublesome were the Cathars and Albigensians. Other heterodox groups were the Humiliati and Waldensians, who began orthodox, but disobeyed Church directives resulting in schism and excommunication.

This is a brief introduction to the particular social, economic and religious environment in which Francis and Clare were born. Within this context, they heard the call of the Gospel, and the Holy Spirit moved them. Their religious lives can be seen as both a response against the ways of the world or as moving in tandem with them. It was an era when the rural, feudal model of society was being replaced by an urban, mobile one. And it was not always peaceful.

Francis and Clare were personally affected by the conflicts between the *Majores* and *Minores*. In the world, their families were set against one another as he was the son of a merchant, she the daughter of nobility. His side was moving up the economic and political ladder, while her side was being pulled down. Francis fought in a battle against the Perugians and Majors, while Clare was exiled from Assisi with her family. Socially, they both witnessed the new problems that accompanied the money generated by the emerging mercantile class. The mass migration to the cities led to overcrowding, destitution, begging, and the facile spread of contagious diseases like leprosy, fueled by close human contact and poor hygiene. The city streets were full of disfigured and disabled beggars, while the lepers were banished to the country roads and hospitals outside the walls. Vices such as prostitution flourished, thriving on the anonymity that

city life offered. Competition for the new money intensified age-old sins such as avarice, greed, dishonesty, and envy.

Recognizing that the cause of so much violence in the world (political and social) was a desire for power, privilege, and money, Francis and Clare renounced their wealthy inheritances, and instead, chose poverty. They believed that God created everyone in his own image, and they did not see any difference in the poor and marginalized; thus their poverty created solidarity with them. They likewise required their followers to leave behind their possessions, birthrights, and titles (if they possessed any) in order to embrace one another equally as brother and sister. The movement of Francis and Clare would be built on a fraternal respect for all people regardless of social status, which was so significant in their era.

Having grown up as a merchant accompanying his father to foreign lands on cloth-buying expeditions, Francis was quite accustomed to mobility. After his conversion, he never stopped being a merchant; what changed was his treasure and his heart. After he discovered the heavenly Pearls of the Gospel, he rejected earthly ones and tirelessly journeyed about to freely give away his treasures. Nor did Francis ever lose his desire to become a knight; what changed was his Lord and weapons. After two failed attempts at becoming an earthly knight, Francis forever laid down his sword and shield. Instead, he donned spiritual armor of the cross and penitential tunic which he would use to valiantly serve the Most High Lord.

Francis and Clare lived during the midst of the clamorous call to the Crusades. The call to arms was not only sanctioned, but was instigated by Church authorities who promised a plenary indulgence (full remission of all punishment due sin) to anyone who would take part in the holy war. Francis heard and responded to the call, too, but set out to the Holy Land armed not with weapons, but with the cross and Gospel. He hoped to evangelize (not kill) the Sultan. Although unsuccessful, he was successful in a later request to the Pope to grant a plenary indulgence to anyone who would make a pilgrimage to the humble Portiuncula. This gesture stood as a peaceful alternative to the violent Crusades.

Familiar with the heretics and dissident Catholics, Francis and Clare purposely chose orthodoxy, despite the fact that Church critics had some legitimate complaints. Francis'

ideas surrounding creation revitalized his culture and Church and suggested to common people everywhere the possibility of finding God wherever they happened to be – not just in a cloister or monastery. Francis was a man of prayer, through which he ultimately became mystically united with Christ’s Passion, which culminated in one event – his reception of the stigmata on Mount Laverna.

*No one could even talk about how holy [Clare] became unless the Holy Spirit helped them to speak.* These were the powerful words spoken by sister Benvenuta, a companion of Clare within San Damiano, during Clare’s process of canonization. Clare, from an aristocratic family, was destined to marry a noble lord who would have increased the power and land holdings of her family. But after she left her household to embrace religious life, she chose the mystical marriage and celestially wedded herself to the noblest of Lords – Jesus Christ Himself. And she did so within the enclosure of San Damiano just outside the Assisi city walls. There, Clare and her sisters embraced poverty and a life in common. They devoted themselves to prayer and work with a strong emphasis on community. Their understanding of community, however, was not limited to themselves, but included the friars, the people of Assisi, even the Church universal. Thus, their prayers were never isolated from the larger Christian community but were attuned to the actual needs of the people with whom the sisters were often in contact. Clare regularly offered spiritual direction to people who visited her. She often prayed over and laid hands on the sick that were brought or sent to her by the friars. Thus, despite the hiddenness of the enclosure, the sisters were able to evangelize in a very Franciscan way. In a Gospel paradox, seclusion for Clare was really openness to the world. Her very name, *Clara* or *Chiara*, means ‘light’, and she shined as a beacon of hope and witness for many who knew her. Most exceptional about her life was Clare’s absolute determination to separate San Damiano from all privileges except poverty. This led to a great struggle with the hierarchy, but Clare was determined to integrate her charisms within the proper structures of the greater Church. And she was successful.

One word recurs over and over in the writings of Francis and Clare, and underlies everything they did in their religious lives: *minoritas*. It is a word that translates into English with difficulty. A technical translation would be *lesserness*, but for them it meant

also humility, meekness, gentleness, poverty, simplicity, trust, obedience. As the world was clawing and fighting its way *up* the economic, political, religious, and social ladder, Francis and Clare did something extraordinary: they chose to go *down*. At the foundation of their life choices was faith in the Christ whom they encountered in the Gospels. Francis and Clare embraced *minoritas*, because they discovered that Jesus had embraced *minoritas*. And Jesus did so, in effect, because it was in his nature. The nature of God is love. Christ – God Almighty – had become minor by emptying himself of everything out of love. *Minoritas* is love. Thus, Francis and Clare imitated Christ. And their embrace of *minoritas* filled them with the Holy Spirit and filled them with the peace of God. *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you.*<sup>i</sup> And that was the message they passed on to others.

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<sup>i</sup> John 14, 27.