



The Road to Peace in Assisi

Following Francis and Clare
In the Footsteps of the Lesser Christ

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Francis and Clare of Assisi

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 births, 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 reemerge and cities began redeveloping. 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,

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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. Armed skirmishes between papal and imperial armies for temporal control of territories were not uncommon. The popes, likewise, challenged the emperors 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 twelfth and thirteenth 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 a rural, feudal 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 and her family were exiled from Assisi. They both witnessed the social new problems that accompanied the money generated by the emerging mercantile class. The mass

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migration to the cities led to overcrowding, destitution, begging, and the 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 between themselves and the poor and marginalized; thus, their poverty created solidarity with society's outcasts. 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 brothers and sisters. Francis's and Clare's movement – their way of life – 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 the 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 to 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's 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.

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 mystical marriage and celestially wedded herself to the noblest of Lords – Jesus Christ Himself. Her religious life took place within the enclosure of San Damiano just outside the Assisi city walls. There, Clare and the 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. 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 who 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 shone as a beacon of hope and witness for many who knew her. Most exceptional about Clare's life was her absolute determination to separate San Damiano from all privileges

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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 particular is found over and over in Francis's and Clare's writings. It lies at the heart of their lives and spirituality. *Minoritas*. It translates into English with difficulty. A technical translation could be 'lesserness,' but it also means poverty, humility, meekness, gentleness, simplicity, trust, and obedience. As the world was clawing and fighting its way *up* the political, economic, religious, and social ladders, Francis and Clare did something extraordinary: they chose to go *down*. They were attempting to imitate Christ whom they encountered in the Gospels. Francis and Clare desired to be *minor* because they discovered that Jesus had embraced *minoritas*. Christ, the second Person of the Trinity, emptied himself of the glories of heaven and became a man, even dying on a cross, for love of humanity. The life, example, and sacrifice of Jesus were for Francis and Clare the model of their lives, and they sought to imitate him. By imitating Jesus's example of divine *minoritas*, they discovered the Kingdom of Heaven, and they renounced every worldly wealth, honor, privilege, or glory. By going down in the world, by becoming *minor* – poor, humble, meek, gentle, simple, trusting, and obedient – they were filled with the Holy Spirit and elevated to God in the Kingdom of Heaven. This is the message of Francis and Clare.

War

*They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears
into pruning hooks.*

ISAIAH 2, 4

(1198 Anno Domini)

Clare's childhood home – the knightly, fortified Offreduccio tower-like palace – ascended in the upper part of Assisi. It rivaled the height of the façade and bell tower of the adjacent cathedral of San Rufino then being refurbished.^A The women of the household – Lady Ortolana, Lady Pacifica, Lady Bona Guelfuccio – were working quietly at their chores with the girls when Clare's uncle Monaldo abruptly burst through the door to their chamber. He looked terrified as he shouted, “The emperor is dead! Henry VI suddenly died! We're finished!” Clare's mother, Ortolana, became alarmed and immediately started reciting prayers. So did the others. Clare's younger sister, Catherine, started crying.

Clara, Chiara, Clare – light, clear, clarity. She had always been devoted to the holy life, even as a child. She was only four years old, but understood things far beyond her age. She knew what could happen as a result of the young emperor's untimely death. Her family was one of only 20 very prominent families in Assisi. The Offreduccios were knightly, and they traced their ancestry to Charlemagne and King Pepin.¹ They were part of the ruling class in Assisi, the *Majores* (Greater), who were aligned with the (now deceased) German emperor. He would be succeeded by a powerless three-year-old son. With a vacuum of power in Germany, Assisi stood to lose imperial protection. Some of the disenfranchised citizenry of Assisi – particularly the *Minores* (Minors – middle-class merchants and artisans) could use this as a perfect opportunity to rebel. Or the papacy could assert itself and try to annex Assisi into the papal territories,

^A Refer to San Rufino in Appendix.

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already strong in Umbria. The Offreduccios and other Majors now faced exile or worse. Clare, too, began to pray with the others.

Their fears were soon realized. In the spring of 1198 there was, indeed, a rebellion led by the Minors. There was nothing that could be done, but surrender the Rocca fort – the castle towering above Assisi from which the feudal powers ruled over its citizens.^B Conrad of Urslingen, the count of Assisi who represented the emperor, had already abandoned the castle. He had quietly returned to Germany, leaving the Majors to fend for themselves. Previously, no one would have dared lift a finger against the fort, for that would have incurred the wrath of the powerful emperor. But now there was no emperor. Immediately, many of the noble Majors fled to nearby Perugia,² vacating their tower-like households, which were soon razed by the Minors along with the Rocca fort.

The Minors declared Assisi an independent *commune* – a republic free of any feudal domination. *Commune* was named after them – the commoners. Such stand-alone city-states were by then already widespread in central and northern Italy. The Minors moved the center of government from the Rocca down to the piazza near the marketplace where the common people lived – in the center of town.^C They then used the stones to reinforce the city walls for protection against reprisals from either the Majors or the Perugians. Some Majors stayed and switched allegiance to the Minors, recognizing the new government. Clare's family preferred to wait and see if there could be a compromise. But when it was obvious that they would have no place in the new government, the Offreduccios left Assisi for Perugia in the year 1200. Clare was six years old.

Clare's father had often explained to her and her siblings the strife between the Majors and Minors. After the fall of the Roman Empire, Italy was invaded by northern Europeans. In order to fend off the attacks, the local lords organized by surrounding themselves with nobility and knights who swore to fight and protect them, thereby maintaining peace and order. In return the noblemen were granted privileges in the form of titles, birthrights, and land possessions. The

^B Refer to Rocca Maggiore in Appendix.

^C Refer to Piazza del Commune in Appendix.

nobility, in turn, protected the commoners and allowed them to farm their land and keep some of the produce to live on. The land, when agreeable, provided for everyone's needs and was the source of wealth and security. However, earlier in the 12th century, the commoners had begun traveling about, buying and selling their wares. They were generating new wealth and capital for themselves. As a result, their cash shifted wealth and power away from land, and they challenged the ways of the nobility. The exchange of money was conducted in the marketplace, which was positioned in the center of the towns. The peasants moved from the rural villages into the cities where they could try to profit in the new market economy. These were the merchants, the burgeoning middle class.

"They are creating turmoil and confusion," the men of Clare's household often complained. "Lesser, burghers, commoners, uncivilized, ignoramuses!" were the disparaging words they often slung at the Minors. "Sure, they're good with numbers and can balance their ledgers," her uncles admitted, "but not one of them is cultured... none can write good Latin. The greats have always come from our class – the nobility. All the greatest theology, philosophy, architecture, and poetry have always been produced by us. Virtually all popes, cardinals, bishops, abbots, and many priests come from among our class. You cannot bring the Minors up to our level; you will only bring us down to theirs. They are destroying civilization. Mark my words – they will be the end of greatness!"

Clare was not afraid to stand up to the powerful and authoritative men surrounding her (a trait she would maintain throughout her life.) "Yes, Uncle Monaldo, maybe some of what you say is true, but they can't all be bad. They, too, were created in the image of God. Surely there are good men among them." "Favarone, you keep your women in line!" Monaldo barked at his younger brother (Clare's father). Clare's family would remain in Perugia between 1200 and 1205 when Clare was between six and eleven years old.

(Two years later)

One early afternoon in 1202 Clare's father ran through their temporary Perugian house shouting triumphantly and practically

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dancing, “We won today! The Minors tried to attack Perugia this morning, but our forces routed them while they attempted to cross the Tiber! It was a total victory for us! We’ll be back in Assisi before long!” Clare just sighed and thought to herself, “Another battle... there will surely be another one and yet another one. War doesn’t solve anything – it just intensifies the animosity and rancor.” She felt compassion for the dead, their families, the wounded, and the imprisoned. She also felt sorry that members of her family would be celebrating despite the suffering of others. They could not see the truth. She went to the household chapel to pray.

(1202 ANNO DOMINI – Earlier that morning)

*This is the end of the free online excerpt.
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Appendix: Guide to Franciscan Sites in Assisi

A. San Rufino

The original home of the Offreduccio family no longer exists. However, documents in Assisi's archives attest that its original location was next to San Rufino, the cathedral of Assisi. San Rufino houses the remains of its namesake underneath the main altar. Little is known about him except from the apocryphal legends. It appears that he was a bishop from Asia Minor who came to Italy to preach in the fourth century. The local pagan authorities resisted; he was beaten, weights were chained to his neck, and he was thrown into the Chiascio River in Costano five miles southwest of Assisi. His remains were recovered by the local Christians and entombed in a chapel near Costano until the eleventh century when they were brought inside the city walls of Assisi and placed in the present church, which was completely rebuilt in the twelfth century. The church of San Rufino was important in Francis's life, as it was here where he was baptized. So were Clare and all the first Franciscans from Assisi. Francis preached in San Rufino for the first time and possibly met with Clare there before she left her household to join him. Today San Rufino is one of the main parish churches of Assisi.

**Reflection:*

-What is the importance of your parish church in your life? Despite his commitment to poverty and simplicity, Francis believed that churches should be embellished, clean, and beautiful. Francis considered churches very important because that is where he received Jesus in the Eucharist.

B. Rocca Maggiore

The impressive medieval castle, Rocca Maggiore, dominates the Assisi panorama from its steep hilltop position on Mount Subasio. From the Rocca are some breathtaking views of the city and surrounding landscape. It is a reminder of the city's feudal past as it once stood guard over the city and territory. After being razed in 1198 by the

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Minors, the fort was rebuilt in 1363 by Cardinal Albornoz, and again in 1538 when Assisi was incorporated into the Papal States.

**Reflection:*

-Consider the contrast between Francis's early life as a young man caught up in local political upheaval with that of his converted life. The warrior becomes a peacemaker; the merchant becomes a mendicant; the troubadour becomes a penitent. In embracing the evangelical life, he renounces war and chooses to identify with Jesus in the Gospels.

C. Piazza del Comune

Located in the heart of Assisi, the *Piazza del Comune* (city hall square) dates back to ancient Roman times when it served as either a forum or place of worship. In medieval times, it was the social, cultural, political, and commercial center of Assisi. Today it has remained mostly as it was during the Middle Ages. Facing the upper side of the piazza stands a beautifully preserved ancient Roman temple built in the first century B.C. in honor of either the goddess Minerva, or Castor and Pollux. It was converted into a church in the Middle Ages and is now dedicated to Mary. To its left stands the *Torre del Popolo* (tower of the people), built between 1275 and 1305. On the other side of the piazza stands the *Palazzo del Comune* (city hall) dating from 1337 and still in use today as city hall. Next to it is the Palace of the *Capitano del Popolo*, (people's captain) where the chief military commanders of the city resided. The ancient *Foro Romano* (Roman forum) is underneath the present pavement and can be visited as part of a museum; there are many ancient and well-preserved Roman inscriptions, epigraphs, sarcophaguses and columns.

**Reflection:*

-Today the *Piazza del Comune* is a reminder of the rise of the Minor merchant class. Their struggle with the Majors must have weighed heavily on Francis before and after his conversion. No doubt, his attitudes toward and abhorrence of money were influenced by that struggle and his experience as a merchant. This led him to desire a fraternal society.

D. Chiesa Nuova

The church of *Chiesa Nuova* (new church), just off the *Piazza del Comune* was built in 1615 by the king of Spain. It is aptly named as it is the newest church within the city walls. A tradition dating from the thirteenth century placed this site as the home and shop of Peter Bernardone, although there is no historical evidence to support it. Most likely, the actual home was on the opposite side of the piazza (where a tourism office is now located); archives testify that Francis's nephew (the son of his brother, Angelo) owned property there. In the rear of the church is a cell commemorating Francis's short imprisonment by his father. To the left of the main altar is an exit leading to the street level below where the family shop once was: note the original thirteenth century door. About fifty few yards down an alley is a chapel known as San Francesco Piccolino. According to tradition, this location was formerly an animal stall where Francis was born. A Latin inscription above the archway reads: "This oratory [chapel] was a stable of ox and donkey, where St. Francis, wonder of the world, was born." Regardless of the authenticity of this tradition, we can imagine Francis playing here as a child and later carousing through the streets with his friends. After his conversion, we can envision Francis begging for stones, singing praises to God, and blessing the townspeople here. Today people come here to pray for children and healthy pregnancies.

**Reflection:*

-There is something special, and even spiritual, about one's first home. Take just a moment to think of the house in which you were born and grew up. When is the last time you were there? Do you have good memories there, or was your childhood difficult? Are you able to recognize God's presence when you were a child?

Footnotes

¹ Gemma Fortini, daughter of Arnaldo Fortini (former mayor of Assisi and scholar of St. Francis) traced the Offreducio family lineage thus.

² Perugia is located about twelve miles northwest of Assisi. Today it is one of two principal cities in Umbria.