



Excerpt from **The Road to Peace in Assisi**

Following Francis and Clare
In the Footsteps of the Lesser Christ

By
Bret Thoman, SFO

Chapter I – War

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

ISAIAH 2, 4

(1198 Anno Domini)

The knightly, fortified Offreduccio tower-like palace soared in the air in the upper part of Assisi. This was the home of Clare. It rivaled the height of the façade and bell tower of the adjacent cathedral of San Rufino then being refurbished.¹ 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. The Offreduccios were knightly, tracing their ancestry to Charlemagne and King Pepin.¹ They were one of just twenty prominent families in Assisi – the *Majores* (Greater) – the ruling class. They were aligned with the now deceased German emperor, whose successor was his powerless three-year-old son. With a power vacuum 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, already strong in Umbria. The Offreduccios and other Majors now faced exile or worse. Clare, too, began to pray with the others.

Assisians and Italians in general were no stranger to conflict. In the centuries before, after the fall of the Roman Empire, Assisi had been ruled by the Byzantines, who were defeated by the Goths under Totila, who were defeated by the Lombards, who were defeated by the Franks. Yet, despite all the chaos, war was never settling.

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 fortress – the castle towering above Assisi from which the feudal powers ruled over its citizens.² 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 fortress, 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,ⁱⁱ vacating their tower-like households, which were soon razed by the Minors along with the Rocca fortress. One young man with his brother and father celebrated the victory – Francis of Pietro Bernardone.

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

¹ Refer to San Rufino in Appendix.

² Refer to Rocca Maggiore in Appendix.

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.³ 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 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. "Minors, lessers, 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 most 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 her entire 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 girls 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 afternoon in November of 1202 Clare's father ran through their Perugian house shouting triumphantly and practically dancing, "We won today! Assisi led by the Minors tried to attack Perugia this morning, but our troops and the Perugians 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

³ Refer to Piazza del Commune in Appendix.

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. She went to the household chapel to pray.

*Contact Bret Thoman for more on this book
Bret.thoman@gmail.com*

Chapter III - Leprosy

And when he saw the lepers, Jesus said, 'Go show yourselves to the priests.' As they were going they were cleansed.

LUKE 17, 14

One day, while he was praying enthusiastically to the Lord, he received this response: “Francis, everything you loved carnally and desired to have, you must despise and hate, if you wish to know my will. Because once you begin doing this, what before seemed delightful and sweet will be unbearable and bitter; and what before made you shudder will offer you great sweetness and enormous delight.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Francis set out from Assisi on horseback towards his family’s property near the church of San Pietro della Spina in the valley not far from the area of Rivotorto. His father had a building there used for dying clothes. Francis exited Assisi through the Moiano gate and took the Strada di Collemaggio road down past San Masseo to the Via Francesca road – the medieval road connecting Rome with France.^{iv} From there he would pass by Arce towards Castelnuovo, then take the Via Antica – the ancient road – connecting Saint Mary of the Angels with Foligno. From there he was just a few minutes from his family property. Francis loved seeing the new clothes and their vibrant colors; however, he loathed the trip because the route would take him by the leper hospital of San Lazzaro^v in the area of Arce.⁴

Francis, like virtually everyone, hated being near the lepers. Their emaciated and pus-filled faces, their hideous, bloodshot eyes, their terrible stench repulsed him. In their hooded gray tunics, they seemed like walking ghosts. The people of his day did not consider leprosy merely a physical illness; no, it was considered a sign of God’s disfavor – a curse. People believed that blessings followed good deeds, while those who had contracted leprosy deserved it due to some immoral act. Thus, they shunned the lepers to avoid contamination – either physical or spiritual.

Francis’s father used to tell him that lepers’ thoughts were filthier than their bodies. They were filled with grudges and were always looking for the chance to avenge themselves on the townspeople who had cast them out, he often said. As Francis passed by the hospital of San Lazzaro that day, he recalled the ancient Arthurian tale of Tristan and Isolde told by the French and Provençal troubadours who frequently passed through Assisi. (*quote Fortini*)

“When King Mark was certain of the unfaithfulness of his queen, he ordered the guards to take her to the stake to be burned. On hand to enjoy the cruel spectacle were a hundred lepers, arriving to the sound of the clappers on their crutches, their faces devoured by disease and splotched with whitish stains, their frightening bloody eyes flaming under swollen eyelids. The queen was dressed in a light gray tunic interwoven with golden threads. Her hair, which came down to her feet, was bound by a golden cord. Ivan, the most despicable of all the lepers, shouted to the king that the flame was too beautiful to be used as a punishment for such a crime as hers. A more fitting one for her-Isolde the beautiful, Isolde the fair-would be to give her to them, the lepers, whose evil passions had been excited by their disease. And the king consented. While the barons and knights shuddered at such a pitiless sentence, the dismal procession started down the hill toward these bestial creatures, filthy, screaming

⁴ Refer to Leper Hospitals in Appendix.

and shouting. But at that moment Tristan, who had been lying in wait, appeared on horseback with his sword raised. For the knight it was a simple task to use the back of his sword like a whip to scatter the flock of diseased and possessed brutes and free his lover. From that time on, she would belong to him as his legitimate bride, since he had rescued her from a danger worse than death by being burned alive- being given over to the insulting, shameful, horrendous, contamination of the lepers.”

Francis shuddered as he spurred his horse to a gallop while he passed by the hospital. Fortunately, he did not see any lepers outside as he rode by. As he safely cleared the environs of the leprosarium and approached the area of Rivortorto, his thoughts turned towards a friend of his who only a few months earlier was discovered to have leprosy. His friend had closed himself in his house until people began wondering where he was. Finally, the doctors were summoned and they examined him. Unfortunately, leprous sores on his arms were discovered. Francis remembered how his friend was torn away from his house and was brought straight to the church of San Giorgio for the sending-off rites.

The priest was called who hastily arranged the rites which would proclaim his friend's permanent separation from Assisi.^{vi} The Mass was almost the same as that of a funeral. Francis remembered very clearly the words of the priest: “My brother, take this cloak and put it on in sign of humility and never leave here without it.” The woolen tunic was gray and full and long, as the statutes prescribed. Reluctantly his friend put it on. “Take this little flask,” the priest continued, “And put in it what will be given you to drink, and under penalty of disobedience I forbid you to drink from the rivers, from the springs, from the wells. Take these gloves. You are forbidden to touch anything that is not yours with your bare hands. If, while walking about, you should meet someone who wishes to talk to you, I forbid you to reply before you put yourself against the wind. You are forbidden to be with any woman who is not of your family. You are forbidden to touch young people or to offer them anything. And from eating from anything but your own leper's bowl. And from entering churches or rectories, and from going to fairs, to mills, and to markets. And from walking through narrow streets where those who meet you cannot avoid you.” At last he was given the wooden clapper. “Take this clapper and carry it always with you. Sound it to warn others of your presence.”

Contact Bret Thoman for more on this book

Bret.thoman@gmail.com

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

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

ⁱⁱⁱ This is from the “Legend of the 3 Companions”, 11.

^{iv} The Via (or Strada) Francesca was an important road in the Middle Ages since it linked Rome and France. It went from Rome up along the Tiber, through Orvieto and then toward Assisi, and from there to the border of Lake Trasimeno. It continued through Arezzo, Bologna, Modena, and along the ancient Roman road, the Via Emilia; from there it went through the Po Valley, then up into Switzerland and into France. Appropriate maps were then in use, and they showed the cities where the traveler could stop for rest. It was used by merchants, pilgrims, ambassadors, and soldiers.

^v Virtually all leper hospital churches were dedicated to San Lazzaro (Saint Lazarus) – the biblical beggar covered with sores – in the Middle Ages. In the fourteenth century the name changed to St. Mary

Magdalene. At that time she was believed to have committed and been contaminated by every sexual sin, until Jesus took her in and cleansed her from her stains.

^{vi} The following description is adapted from Arnaldo Fortini's "New Life of St. Francis", pp. 206-212.