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The Happy Days

A condition of the pope's approval of their movement was that Francis's men attach themselves to a church that would serve as their official home. Neither Bishop Guido nor the canons of the Cathedral of Saint Rufino had one to offer, so during the cold early months of 1210 they lived in an abandoned shanty by a meandering stream called Rivo Torto a half hour walk from Assisi. These quarters were so confining that Francis wrote the names of the brothers on the overhead beams so that each might have his own spot for private prayer or rest. Their obligations as tonsured clerics required them to recite and chant specific hourly prayers from matins at dawn to compline before bed. Those who were able to also read a breviary. Praying aloud, Masseo of Marignano droned on in a single tone like a cooing dove but Francis recited every syllable clearly. He amazed the others by remembering every prayer, verse, or text after he had read it once.

None were said to have complained about their circumstances, even when they had no bread and made do with turnips. They existed in a realm of their own, free of whatever unhappiness or strife they experienced before. As unable as each had been, inwardly or outwardly, to conform to the world, now he melded into a brotherhood with a single goal of living the Gospel. What one suffered, whether it was soaked skin in the rain or stiff fingers in the cold, they all suffered. Discomfort was erased by being greater than their one

self. Theirs was the enthusiasm, the myopia, of first love but it was for their new life together. They persisted in this way until the day a man drove his donkey into their midst and seemed to take offense that they were claiming his animals' ramshackle shelter as their own.

At that point the Benedictine monks of Mount Subasio gave them the use of Saint Mary of the Angels, or Portiuncula, whose chapel Francis had repaired some three years earlier when he was still without companions. It was set on low ground, enveloped in fog when it was cold, and often damp. So thick with evergreen oaks was the forest that surrounded its clearing that pig keepers drove their herds there to feed on acorns. According to legend, Portiuncula was established in the fourth century by four holy men from Palestine who had visited Rome before building the hermitage there with a chapel and four huts. Francis had already restored its tiny stone church, which was about eighteen feet wide by forty-five feet long with an arched ceiling, a semicircular apse for the altar, and two arched doors, one in a side wall.

When he had first come upon it soon after he broke with this father, the one-story chapel was filled with rubble. He had carried away the unneeded stones on his back and restored its wooden pitched roof. Now near the church Francis and his men built a small shelter of tree and vine branches where they could sleep. They roofed it with dried rushes and daubed it with mud to keep out the wind and then they renovated as best they could the other buildings. They worked to revive the straggling grape and bean vines and fruit trees that remained from earlier long-abandoned cultivation. Francis took up residence in a small hut near a fig tree. To mark the boundaries of Portiuncula they dug a ditch around its perimeter and for further privacy they planted a hedge.

The men's bond with each other was protection against hostile forces from without and within, whether devils, hunger pangs, or leaking roofs. Francis fell in love with this place, as a devoted son

loves his mother. He listened to its birdsong and inhaled the tang of pine when the air was hot. In late afternoon he watched wisps of inky clouds float across the pewter sky and saw the hilltops glow red as the sun bade them farewell for the night, only to rise again the next morning and light their day. The man who denied he had a home, who said he possessed nothing, held Portiuncula in his heart. He explained this reverence to his brothers by saying that he had received a revelation that Mary, the mother of Jesus, loved this church above all others.

He would say that this place with its branch and mud huts was to be the model of all dwellings of Lesser Brothers throughout the world, not just because of its simplicity, but because it was sanctified by the brothers' devotion, by their suffering and prayer, and by their readiness to avoid idleness by helping the poor with their labors in the fields. But Francis insisted that the Lesser Brothers did not own Saint Mary of the Angels, not by any means. To acknowledge that Portiuncula was only on loan to them, each year he lived, Francis sent his landlord, the Benedictine abbot, a tribute of a basket of fish. The monks in return thanked him with a jar of oil.

At regular intervals, after penance and contemplation at Portiuncula had reinvigorated him, Francis moved out into the world, not only up the slope of Mount Subasio to Assisi but to other cities, with a companion. When they passed a church they would pray, "We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world." Sometimes when they entered city gates their unkempt appearances alarmed the residents. To show the unimportance of the conventional things of the world as much as to make use of what he had available, Francis mended his ashen tunic with bits of bark and plants. In cold weather the rich were particularly moved to give him clothes so that he might be better protected. He accepted these gratefully and passed them on to the first poor person who came their way. He and his companion brothers bid peace to all and called on them to love and fear

God and follow his commandments. It was an era, like many others that came after it, that believed it was living in the final days and that the great judgment approached. Surely Francis spoke of this but he won his listeners because he did not speak down to them or scold. In church, the priests veiled Jesus in the mysteries of the Latin Mass and dense Biblical passages that kept God hovering above the clouds. Francis, in the streets, spoke in the clear and direct Umbrian words they knew. He drew his direct, emotional style from the leaders of the commune, and he sometimes began by quoting from a popular ballad, which led him into a presention of the loving Jesus he had come to know, the Savior who had soothed his anguish and sacrificed himself for all mankind. Rather than accuse his hearers of their iniquities, Francis tapped into his own abiding sense of guilt and worthlessness. He spoke from his heart, acknowledging himself to be one who had sinned but who later found peace by changing his life. Above all, he preached what they did not hear in church. With joy he assured them that God loved them and that they should rely on his love. As if for the first time, people heard this. Jesus had said it, but this message from the pulpit had become obscured.

One time at Portiuncula when Francis was returning from prayer in the woods, Masseo approached him with a question that had been on his mind: "Why you?" He pointed out that Francis was not handsome, nor especially learned, nor a man of much importance, yet people were willing to hear what he said to say. "You want to know?" Francis repeated the question twice as if searching for an answer and then replied, "God has not seen anyone more vile or insufficient than I am. And so to do that wonderful work which He intends me to do, He chose me, for God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame to the wise." Basically, Francis believed what Christendom believed, the teachings that had been set forth in the Nicene Creed of the fourth century. He believed in one God, a Holy Trinity of three persons. The Father had created all things that were seen and unseen. His Son Jesus came to earth and became

a man born of the Virgin Mary to redeem humanity from sin. The Holy Spirit guided the Church. Francis believed in one holy Roman Catholic Church of the apostles. He believed that baptism freed man from the stain of Adam's original sin, that there was life after death, that Jesus rose in body from the dead, and that all would rise on Judgment Day. Most passionately of all, he believed that Jesus had died in agony on the cross in payment for man's sins, including those that Francis had himself committed. He felt that a personal debt to be paid. The emphasis he placed on peace was something of a novelty for a Roman Catholic deacon at a time when the church was waging Crusades. It suggests that visions of his bloody combat against the nobles remained with him and that he valued the calm that his surrender to God had brought him.

Nonetheless, deep remorse over the sins he had committed, for which the Savior had suffered and died in agony, sometimes brought him near to despair. Then he was inclined to believe that his life was pointless and that he should abandon entirely the strange business of sleeping in holes like a fox and eating refuse like a dog. He never wholly trusted that he would not abandon the onerous life he had chosen for himself. Had he not attempted to be a merchant, then a knight? He had wanted to be a troubadour. Could the appeal of being a holy man fade as the others had? He wanted to drink wine, eat delicacies, have the pleasures of the flesh. When others honored his commitment, he said. "I can still have sons and daughters; do not praise me as being secure."

When carnal thoughts overwhelmed him, he countered them by throwing himself in icy water that formed in the ditch. Francis would be in agony until he felt God's grace bring him back from despondency. Then his heart would rise a greater distance than the depths into which it had fallen and Francis would be elated and would preach against the snare of hopelessness. Thomas of Celano quotes him as saying, "The devil rejoices most when he can snatch

away spiritual joy from a servant of God. He carries dust so that he can throw it into even the tiniest hole of conscience."

He liked to refer to this as "Babylonian rust," drawing on an image from Ezekiel 24:6. Francis said that if a soul remained stupefied in sadness, "the Babylonian stuff will increase so that unless it was driven out by tears, it will generate an abiding rust in the heart." He told his brothers not to show themselves to be unhappy or upset either to each other or to strangers. "Examine your sins and weep and groan before God in your rooms," he told them. "Otherwise show yourselves to be joyful in the Lord."

This was another key to his success with people. Francis taught that the worship of God need not be a fearsome matter. His public self was always cheerful, particularly in comparison to many priests who affected a solemnity in public that belied their private lives. The church taught that life was a miserable prelude to the eternal happiness of heaven and that man must atone or go to hell. Francis instead urged the faithful to turn from sin, anger, and war so that they might better savor lives of love and the enormous joy of harmony with God. Unlike the heretical Cathars who stressed that the material world was the work of Satan, Francis took delight in the birds, trees, and flowers that God had created, and saw in them a sign of God's love, order, and plan.

Cathars, recognizing that the popular Francis was a friend to the Roman Catholic Church they so despised, sometimes assailed him. Once when Francis was in a city in Lombardy, one of them pointed out that the local priest lived with a woman. Learning that a priest in the crowd was the one in question, Francis fell in the dust at the prelate's feet and kissed the hands that held the Eucharist at Mass. "These hands have touched my sacred Lord," Francis said. "They are not able to lessen His power. This man might do bad things to himself, but he is good for me."

One priest in particular was touched by Francis's good will and equanimity, based as it was in the love that Jesus taught. Sylvester

had met Francis in the early days of his conversion and soon thereafter had felt that Francis had cheated him when he purchased some of the paving stones that Francis sold when he was renovating Saint Damian. After Bernard of Quintavalle joined Francis and gave away his wealth to the poor, Sylvester felt that Francis should have given him the stones as a gift and he told Francis so. A smiling Francis then filled Sylvester's hands with money and the prelate departed a happy man. But over time he became preoccupied by Francis's generosity and good will. Sylvester mused that he was older than Francis and closer to leaving the world, but it was Francis who had in spirit already departed it and Francis who actually lived the Gospel message of love and renunciation that Sylvester only preached. One night in a dream the face of Francis appeared to the priest and from his mouth a golden cross emerged. It grew so tall that it touched the sky and so broad that its arms encircled both halves of the world. With no delay Sylvester joined Francis and his men at Portiuncula.

Not everyone was persuaded by Francis and his men, however, not even those who saw their merit, such as Boncampagno, a man from Signa, near Florence. A layman of proud and boisterous personality who taught rhetoric in Bologna, Boncampagno was as appalled as he was impressed by the followers of Francis. He was concerned that many were young and some were mere children and thus did not have sufficient judgment when they took up their arduous new life. He wrote, "Because of the frailty of their time of life, youth are inclined, as nature allows, to volatility and a lack of balance. These, indeed, have reached such a degree of foolishness that they wander about heedlessly through the cities, towns, and remote places, while enduring horrible and inhuman suffering which makes martyrs of them."

Some of the brothers did not so much sacrifice themselves as proceed through the world in their own unique fashion. Brother Juniper was eager to help a gravely ill brother at Portiuncula who said that he wished he could eat a pig's leg. Juniper went outside, found and seized one, then cut off its limb and cooked it. He rejoiced at the

bounty of the Lord who had provided the pig so that he could comfort his brother. But then the swineherd appeared in their midst, swearing, cursing, and calling Juniper a madman. Francis rushed in, tried to take charge, apologized profusely and said they would do anything the owner wished to make amends. The man did not care. He was so angry that he heaped double curses on them all. He stalked off, leaving Francis concerned about the ill will he could stir up against the brothers. He tried to explain to Juniper that the man had good reason to be angry and he sent his mystified follower out to apologize several times. The swineherd rebuffed Juniper at first, but eventually he too was touched by the man's simplicity. Chastened, he roasted a pig and sent it to the brothers as a peace offering for having been so vile. Pleased with Juniper's patience in the face of difficulty, Francis said he wished he had a forest of junipers.

John the Simple became another enthusiastic follower. One day while he was plowing his family's field he heard that Francis was sweeping a church in Assisi and he quickly went to help him. Afterward, when the two were resting, John announced that he wanted to join the brothers. Francis said that all he had to do was to give away his belongings. John believed that his portion of the family property consisted of an ox that he used to plow their land, so he brought it to Francis. Meanwhile, his impoverished family, which included his much younger brothers, was in agony not only because he was leaving them but because he was taking away their means of income. Francis tried to explain that John's serving God would help their souls, but seeing their despair, he returned the animal.

Many people who did not want to overturn their lives completely asked Francis how they might become better people while still remaining in the world, many under the vows of marriage. According to Thomas Celano, Francis gave them guidance, but the wording of his instructions is unknown. Given that for Francis the words of the Gospel sufficed, and since they wanted to remain in their homes with their families, it might have simply consisted of the final of the

three verses that Francis, Bernard, and Peter Cattani found when they consulted the missal at the Church of Saint Nicholas, one that called for self-sacrifice and obedience to Christ's teaching. Matthew 16:24 says, "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." These followers included widows and unmarried women who might have joined a convent if they had had enough money to pay the required dowry, but after hearing Francis speak, or learning of the Beguines, they came together to live lives of prayer and mutual support in private houses. A notable number of the women of Greccio, a town that particularly welcomed Francis, joined in such an arrangement. Many took vows of virginity and adopted a religious habit. While some remained in their own homes, they led a common way of life by fasting, praying, and doing good works. They did not withdraw from the world as much as abandon its distractions, and they were guided by the Lesser Brothers. In later years a writer said of the people of Greccio, "Despite their youthful age and their great simplicity, they seemed to have been formed by holy religious women who had been in the service of Christ for a long time." Married people in this city and others committed themselves to lives of penance while remaining in their own homes. Some regard these untonsured lay followers as prefiguring the Third Order of Saint Francis. Nicholas IV, the first Franciscan pope, established the formal rule of the Third Order in 1289.

In the evening, after the Lesser Brothers staying in Greccio would sing the praises of the Lord, the townspeople, including nobles, servants, men, and women would come from their houses to join them in repeating over and over "Blessed be the Lord God." Even toddlers who could barely talk mumbled the words as best they could.

Clare took up her new life in Assisi in the spring of 1212. After fleeing the Offreduccio compound in the dark of night and taking

shelter first with Benedictine nuns and then with Beguines at Panzo, Clare awoke one mid-April morning at Saint Damian with Pacifica and Agnes sleeping nearby. As roosters crowed in the distance, the glow of early dawn filled the narrow, arched window of the loft. She rose up from her mattress of vines, ready for prayers at first light. Agnes, née Catherine, and Pacifica also picked themselves up from the brick floor eager for their new life. Having traded their fine garments for the mottled grey homespun tunics typically worn by the poor women of Assisi, they pulled these over their heads, running their palms along the coarse woolen weave, pleased with the patches. Around their waists they tied ropes ending in three knots. Thus Clare began her first day at Saint Damian. Francis first saw the small seventh century monastery, named to honor a physician who was martyred with his brother Cosmas in the third century, when he was a young merchant and spiritual seeker. Then it consisted of a chapel, a room where the priest lived, and an underground chamber or crypt. With money Clare had given him and knowledge of construction he probably gained when the commune repaired the nobles' damaged homes, Francis had renovated the property along the lines of convents at the time. He took down the wall between the nave and the priest's room to enlarge the chapel. Then he removed the overhead beams, which allowed him to raise the height of the chapel by installing a pointed barrel ceiling. Above this he built a large sleeping loft. From the original floor of the crypt he removed the stone or terra cotta stone pavement.

In keeping with the construction of the time, the door to the loft was at least fifteen feet above the ground. Each night the women pulled up the wooden ladder and the entrance was shut and barred against intruders. Upstairs, Clare slept on a bed made of vines she had twisted and woven into a mattress that grew sharp and brittle as it dried. She used as her pillow a smooth rock from the river. By day in prayer Clare lay prostrate on the ground. She had no time or interest in simple conversation but "spoke the words of God" by reciting

Scripture. Thus she lost herself in the only power that was stronger than her family, the mighty and merciful God who had delivered her from them and placed Pacifica and Agnes by her side.

On Monday, Wednesday, and Friday Clare consumed no food and on the other days she ate so little that she became ill. Francis then ordered her to eat at least a half a roll of bread on three days of the week, and Bishop Guido repeated and reinforced this directive. Still, Pacifica grew anxious to the point of weeping when she observed the frail state that Clare's devotions had brought her to. Since giving the palm to Clare on Palm Sunday as a signal that all was prepared for her to join Francis's movement, Bishop Guido had been a source of strength and wisdom. But on July 30, 1212, barely three months after Clare left her family, he died after two years as bishop, which was a blow to everyone at both Saint Damian and Portiuncula.

At least two Lesser Brothers lived close to the women in branch-and-mud huts so that they might protect and support the women spiritually and physically. Clare's kinsman Rufino and Philip the Tall, who had accompanied Francis when he first met with Clare, are likely to have been the first two. Country people heard Mass at Saint Damian on Sundays, so Sylvester could have been present as well. It seems possible that soon after Clare, Pacifica, and Agnes settled in, Clare's mother Ortolana returned from the pilgrimage that Clare had urged on her and appeared at Saint Damian in an effort to come to terms with the girls' betrayal as well as with the beating that Agnes had suffered at the hands of her kinsmen. Ortulana also had news to bring them: Raniero, who had asked for Clare's hand, was now affianced to one of her cousins. Clare, Agnes, and Pacifica greeted her barefoot and dressed in the castoff clothes of poor women, with Clare also wearing a shirt of animal hair under her tunic. Surely they were as dirty as serfs, reddened by the sun, and bruised and scratched from their rough life.

What might Ortolana have said to Pacifica, with whom she had left Clare for safekeeping? Clare's youngest sister Beatrice is likely

to have been placed under guard and as safe from the improbable lure of Saint Damian as she was ever likely to be. Let us assume that Ortolana brought the trio food, which they rejected, forcing the mother in subsequent weeks to send them table scraps and half-used bread—Clare rejected loaves that were fresh and untouched. After five months, in September, Clare's cherished childhood friend Benvenuta joined her from Perugia. Arrangements for the young woman's escape from home and travel from the enemy city were probably devised with the aid of one or two of the Lesser Brothers, for it is doubtful that Benvenuta's family would have approved her taking up residence with the outcasts of Assisi. However it happened, Clare was now the leader of a group of four.

Thus Saint Damian was firmly established as the second great center, after Portiuncula, of the Franciscan movement. Details of Clare's early days at Saint Damian are few, but we have an idea of what her labors entailed. The women themselves worked to overcome their physical limitations and plunged into tasks that servants had probably performed for them until they abandoned their family homes. Clare and her companions mended the brothers' garments, cutting patches from usable parts of discarded fabric then whip-stitching them over the holes and tears. In exchange, the brothers did heavy work as needed, including chopping wood and digging a garden where they could cultivate herbs, vegetables, grapes, and cereals like barley for bread.

Quite probably, out of true piety as well as a desire to prove herself worthy to Francis, Clare endured the hardships of mud, ice, and hunger. As Francis's follower, she served lepers at Saint Damian and at the nearby village for them, which included Saint Lazarus of Arce, the house that Francis had visited after kissing the leper in his path. Laypersons had long served in hospices and in 1212 a church council in Paris set down guidelines that dovetailed with what Clare had pledged to Francis. They could live among the sick if there was sufficient space, provided that they followed a rule that

required them to renounce their property, live in chastity, promise obedience to their superior, and wear a religious habit rather than secular clothing. Clare did preach alongside Philip the Tall. One can infer that she was met with hostility, at least initially, because at the end of her life she recorded that she and her companions "did not shirk deprivation, poverty, hard work, vexations, or the ridicule or scorn of the world—rather we considered them as great delights." This moved Francis to swear to give the same care to the women of Saint Damian, whom he called the Poor Sisters, that he gave to his brothers. He wrote a "form of life," a few simple rules, for them but this document has been lost. Surely what she called the world's contempt for them might have taken the form of the derision of townspeople who could now safely berate noble women who had been born to a station so much higher than theirs, had lived on the tolls that noble families exacted from them, and had then been so reckless as to throw it all away to assume a religiosity that they were supposed to respect.

However the Assisians might have received her at first, her preaching inspired a few other well-born women to join her. As her own reputation and that of the community grew, people from Umbria turned to them for prayer and other forms of healing. Abandoned and orphaned female babies and toddlers were given to them to raise, and thus the laughter, cries, and incessant demands of children became part of their daily life.

The women of Saint Damian and the Lesser Brothers were ultimately able to avoid the kind of scandal that the Waldensians had created. Burchard of Ursperg, a German chronicler of the Middle Ages, wrote of the Waldensians: "They claimed to be leading the life of the Apostles: they refused all ownership, even a house to reside in, and they went about from city to town. But the Lord Pope took them to task for certain strange practices: they cut off the upper part of their shoes and walked around almost barefooted: they wore mantles like religious, but had their hair cut exactly like the laity; but

the most reprehensible thing about them was that men and women travelled about together, lived together most of the time in the same house, and even sometimes, it was said, slept in the same bed. All these practices, they claimed, came from the Apostles themselves." Burchard wrote that in contrast to these, the Lesser Brothers had "renounced all eccentricities and all the excesses mentioned above." Women who wandered the world, even in groups, invited scorn and danger. Unlike the women of the Humilitari and Waldensian movements, who travelled with the men, Clare and her companions would remain in Assisi.

In time Clare would become a respected healer, but the one skill that she possessed at the outset of her life at Saint Damian was the craft of spinning, turning wool or plant fibers into treads and yarn. Idleness was abhorrent to Francis, who encouraged his followers to do whatever work they could so that they would not abuse the good nature of those who gave them support and alms. She obeyed him to the letter and embraced the life he had given her. That she was accomplished at spinning was noted during her canonization process and some linen threads that she produced, along with vestments she helped to make, are displayed among the few relics of her life. As a young woman working half a century before the invention of the spinning wheel, Clare sat on a stool with a rod or distaff holding flax fibers in the crook of her left arm. In her right hand she held a spindle about nine inches long with a weight, possibly of clay, at the bottom to steady it. Using her left-hand fingers to pull out the fibers from the distaff, with her right hand she drew, twisted, and spun the fibers into thread through a notch on the top of the spindle.

Cloth production would be the work of many companions with separate skills, possibly including the brothers, who may have been weavers and dyers when they had been in the world. Some wove Clare's threads into cloth that was sewed into vestments that were later embellished with embroidery. One example of this work on display today at the Basilica of Saint Clare is an alb with twenty

patterns of stitches, including lozenges, crosses, squares, and a key motif along the hem. The pairs of stylized birds and animals may have been inspired by carvings found at the Romanesque Cathedral of Saint Rufino where a band of birds and mythical beasts surround the arched doorway.

The women of Saint Damian became known for producing corporals, tunics that priests wore while saying Mass. They placed these vestments in boxes and had them distributed, possibly by the brothers, to churches throughout Umbria. Theirs was a free offering. They did not sell them to the churches, but trusted that in giving what they could to the world they would receive what they needed to keep their community alive.

Clare's first summer at Saint Damian was a time of marvelous events. In 1212 the city renewed itself and began to salve the wounds and erase the scars of its rout of the nobles. The fountain near the bishop's palace was repaired so that its spring-fed waters flowed again as they had in Roman times. Clare's uncle Scipione, father of Rufino, made this possible when he donated a plot of land covered with olive trees that had once been a source of the fountain. Another landowner had to be paid restitution after he complained that the work on his property was done without his permission, but when the project was finally finished, these proud words were chiseled above it: "Bless the Lord, O fountains. Drink, sick one, and be healed." City consuls expected that the flowing water works would attract new residents and provide a product to sell beyond the city walls. In fact, for centuries afterward a tax on these waters was a major source of revenues.

The commune took over the ancient Roman temple to Minerva, goddess of wisdom. It had served as the abbey of Saint Donato on the merchants' forum, the home of some eight Benedictine monks. For various offenses the order had fallen into disfavor in the region. Seeking to regain good will and use its funds efficiently, it rented out the property to the commune for a term of one hundred years, with the expectation of renewing the agreement for at least a century after

that. The temple/abbey became a mayoral residence and city hall where a magistrate rendered judgment on civil and criminal cases.

In July something yet more marvelous occurred. Saint Rufino, the martyred bishop who was city's patron, appeared to Francis's boyhood teacher Guido in a dream. This legendary figure of antiquity, whose dates are disputed, took the sleeper by the hand and led him to the cathedral that bore his name. They descended to its crypt, which was perennially soaked in stagnant water, and found that his bones were floating there. Guido had this dream two more times before he went to the canon. The canon went to the bishop who soon led a solemn procession of dignitaries to the spot. They excavated until a Roman sarcophagus carved with voluptuous figures of the goddess Selene and her lover the shepherd Endymion emerged from the muck. Inside were bones, which were presumably those of Saint Rufino. They were reburied in the crypt of the cathedral amid much ceremony and resulting miracles.

As this unfolded, young strangers arrived, sometimes in small parties, sometime in surges. The Children's Crusade, another spontaneous movement of the period, was flowing through Italy. Undoubtedly some of the ragtag army arriving from the north made its way to the streets and fields of Assisi. Sometime between Easter and Pentecost, when Clare was escaping her family and setting up her new life, groups of agricultural workers in northern Europe, including adults and adolescent boys and girls as well as children, possibly moved by the fervor of the Easter season, joined together in a mission to free the Holy Land from the Infidel. In several separate groups they followed a general route through the Rhine Valley, over the Alps and down into Italy.

They converged in Genoa where a youth from Cologne named Nicholas took command. From there they fanned out across the peninsula. Scholars disagree as to specific facts of the movement. Some believe it was a campaign of the poor people, few of whom were younger than fifteen. Some seven thousand are said to have reached

Genoa, whence some went to Marseilles and others to Venice where they were boarded onto ships and sold as slaves in Arab markets in the Holy Land. Still more went south through Umbria to Brindisi in Italy's boot where a bishop prevented them from sailing. These then returned home. Some accounts say Nicholas, the possible inspiration for the story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin that would be written sixty years later in 1284, died on the return journey to Germany. Another possibility is that angry parents hanged his father for giving birth to a son who had caused so much pain and havoc. Other reports said that Nicholas reached the Holy Land and fought at Acre and the siege of Damietta and eventually returned home safely.

Whatever befell Nicholas, most chroniclers agree that he wore a cross in the shape of a Greek Tau, the letter that Francis added to his own signature. Whether it was a coincidence or not, in that summer of 1212, Francis decided that like Nicholas he would travel to the Holy Land. With a companion he embarked from Ancona, a port on the low, sandy Italian western coast of the Adriatic Sea, but soon pelting rain and obstinate wind forced his boat over more than one hundred miles of angry waters to Slavonia on the rocky Dalmatian coast. They found they had waited too late in the year for a sea voyage to the Holy Land, and knew they would have to return home, but Francis and his companion had no money for passage back to Italy. Their solution was to slip on board a ship and stow away. Thomas of Celano put this tale of Francis's impulsive misdeed in spiritual perspective and indicated that their passage was paid. He wrote that a paying passenger protected the poor men when they were discovered by telling the angry crew that he would share his own provisions with the two stowaways and that they would pose no further trouble. Then when another storm blew up causing further delays, the food that had been reserved for the two holy scofflaws fed the whole ship for the extended voyage.

The next year, 1213, Francis travelled with Bernard of Quintavalle to the shine of Saint James in northwestern Spain. Thomas of Celano suggests that his ultimate intention was to go to Morocco, a Muslim stronghold where he might try to win souls for Christ and even see its sultan. By now, there was no limit to his imagination of what the Lord could accomplish through him, and in his eagerness he sometimes raced ahead, leaving Bernard to scramble as best he could to keep up.

The time for such a trip had never been more propitious. During July 1212, Christian forces won a decisive battle against the Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula. Most of it was already in Christian hands, divided into the kingdoms of Castile, Leon, Aragon, Portugal, and Navarre. However, the extreme south bordering the Mediterranean continued to be under the rule of the Almohades dynasty, which was based in Morocco. Pope Innocent III, through the aid of bishops in Spain, persuaded the various monarchs to work together to vanquish them entirely. Under Alfonso VIII of Castile, with the crucial help of a local shepherd who knew the mountain passes, they defeated Mohammed-ben-Naser, known to Europeans as Miramamolin, the Sultan of Morocco, at Las Navas de Tolosa near the city of Jaén on July 16, 1212. About one hundred thousand Moors were killed, compared to an estimated two thousand Catholics. A jubilant Alfonso VIII sent the tent and standard of his defeated foe to Innocent III, along with a detailed report of the victory.

As a young man Francis's imagination had been captured by the story of Roland, a tale created a hundred years before Francis's birth, probably in Normandy by the poet Turold in 1095. It is possibly the greatest of the *chanson de geste*, a medieval genre that celebrates heroic characters and mighty, unusually military, feats. *The Song of Roland* was inspired by what had in fact been a minor skirmish between Charlemagne's army and Basque forces in 778. The poet set aside historical facts and turned the defeat into a tale of inspiration.

Charlemagne was in his mid-thirties at the time of the real encounter, but the poet made him an old man with a flowing white mane of hair.

The story begins with a fabricated tale of betrayal by Charlemagne's brother-in-law against the fictitious Roland, Charlemagne's nephew, and his faithful friend Oliver. It celebrates the idea that the performance of feudal duty is a man's greatest deed and that he must sacrifice all else to this end. In the tale, Charlemagne stationed the brave and eager Roland at a mountain pass and ordered him to sound his horn if the Saracen attacked, but in his pride Roland delayed too long. One by one Charlemagne's dukes fell and his troops dwindled. Now Roland was ready to sound the horn. "Too late!" cried Oliver. "You have killed us with your pride!" Roland blew until his temples burst and salty blood poured through his throat. Still, Roland and Oliver were able to bow to each other before departing this life. When fierce Roland fell, the angel Gabriel himself raised his soul to Paradise where it was met by the heavenly host.

The Pass of Roncesvalles is the traditional site of the battle and the beginning of a route to the shrine of Saint James. Surely Francis walked the terrain where his hero Roland had fought and fallen. Whatever the path he took to get there, the journey home was arduous. A hostile host drove Francis and Bernard from their lodgings and an ailing Francis lost the power of speech for three days. As he recovered he told Bernard that he was so hungry he was ready to eat a bird. Before they took many more steps a horseman they had seen riding in the distance drew up to them and presented Francis with a fowl ready for the spit.

Sometime in these years, divine grace may have worked in his heart in another way. Francis, who urged his hearers to seek the forgiveness of God, may well have reconciled with his own father.† One small clue to this lies in his comment to the Bishop of Imola, a city

† Peter possibly died by 1215 because in that year Angelo is recorded in city archives as Agnelus Picae, or son of Pica.

about thirty miles southeast of Bologna. When Francis requested his permission to preach there, the bishop denied it, saying, "It is enough that I preach to the people." Francis meekly accepted the refusal, departed, but soon reappeared. "What do you want now, Brother?" the bishop asked. Francis answered, "If a father drives his son out of one door, he must come back in another." Could Francis have made such a statement if he had not done it himself? The bishop was so charmed that he told Francis that he and his men could preach in his city then and at any time in the future. In similar fashion, Francis who preached forgiveness to others may have made a way back to his father's heart. If the angry, disowned Francis cast his father from his heart, the penitent peace seeker surely thought better of it and invited Peter Bernadone to come back in.